

The **BLACK** **FOX** OF YUKON

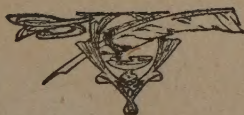




The Black Fox's Last Stand

THE BLACK FOX OF YUKON

BY
ELLIOTT WHITNEY



Illustrated by Harry W. Armstrong

The Reilly & Lee Co.
Chicago

Copyright, 1917
by
The Reilly & Britton Co.

The Black Fox of Yukon

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I LAZY DON	9
II A THOUSAND DOLLAR DAY DREAM.....	25
III THE AWAKENING OF DON BLACKBURN.	40
IV HANK CLEM'S PRISONER.....	57
V A MIDNIGHT VISITOR.....	72
VI HUSK CLEARS HIS RECORD.....	85
VII TWO FROM MISSOURI.....	103
VIII THE FOX HUNT.....	116
IX COBBLESTONE HILL	131
X STARTLING NEWS	148
XI ALONE IN THE BARRENS.....	164
XII AN ODD MEETING.....	180
XIII THE HIDE-AWAY	201
XIV THE SECRET OF THE BLACK FOX.....	218
XV A DOUBTFUL RESCUE	236
XVI A VICTORY FOR TWO DONS.....	254

The Black Fox of Yukon

CHAPTER I

LAZY DON

I have always liked to believe that the stories I read are true, and perhaps that is one reason I have always liked the story of "The Black Fox," for I heard that story long before I ever thought to write it down. Donald Blackburn — and that was his real name — is still alive and young enough to be called a boy; his pranks on that exciting hunting trip when he told me his story made it hard for me to believe that he was old enough to vote, which he proudly assured me he was. But the Donald Blackburn I knew up there in the north woods, the woodsman who always rose to the emergency of the moment, the hunter who knew every trick and trait of wild game and the wilder country — well, I could hardly believe that he was the boy whose nickname of "Lazy Don" had sent him out to prove

that there was something besides daydreams beneath his thatch of wavy brown hair.

I wish that I could tell you the story as he told it to me, with the tang of spruce and hemlock in the crisp winter air, the reek of the camp fire smoke, and the wide stretch of the Barrens before us to make a background to the gripping yarn. But then, you would lose much that Don was too modest to put in, details that I learned later from Claire Blackburn, from old Skagway, the trapper, from Hide-Away Don himself. You will want the whole story, just as it happened, so here goes:

Ordinarily, such a fine, crisp autumn day as the last of September ushered in on Don Blackburn and the little north Wisconsin town of Lac du Chien would have found the seventeen-year-old boy out in the pine woods with his rifle and a dog — if he could have coaxed one along. But to-day Don paid no attention to the lure of the glorious weather; no one else in the Blackburn family seemed to know that the sun was shining and that the willows down the bend of the St. Louis River were showing a red that outblushed even the hard maples in the grove back of the

house. Hard days had fallen upon the Blackburns, and they were not a family upon whom misfortune sat lightly.

Don of them all was able to smile when bad luck hit them, which was another reason why the rest of them glowered so ill-humoredly that Don had no heart for the Saturday excursion he had been promising himself all the week of schooldays. The Blackburns were not an affectionate family; that is, they were careful not to show any feeling openly. And like most people who hide their true selves from their nearest kin, now when misfortune should have knit them close, it only made them sarcastic and critical.

Poor Don had felt it most of all, for his sunny nature simply *would* come to the surface every now and then, to be rewarded with something like: "If you'd get out and split that kindling as I told you to half an hour ago you wouldn't need to stand around grinning like a Chessy cat at your own foolish thoughts."

Don did not know what it was all about. He was the youngest but one in the family of four children. Benny was the baby, and like most children who have come to their parents late in life, he was favored above any of the rest.

Clara and Louise, nineteen and twenty-one, were old enough to fight their own battles, but Don, the butt of them all, found himself constantly in the attitude of dodging, both mentally and physically. For over a month now he had sensed the trouble that was dropping over the Blackburn family like a gray mist, but the ever-bitter family council was always hushed when he drew near. He resented the treatment, but his questions brought only grumpy replies.

"Care if I go down to Ensol's, ma?" he asked finally. "He's got a ——"

"Go, and good riddance," snapped his mother, who had been well-nigh distracted by the howls of ten-year-old Benny, who had run a sliver under his thumb nail and would neither allow the sliver to remain or to be pulled out. Mrs. Blackburn was a nervous-looking woman, black of eye and hair, and still smooth of cheek, but just now lines of worry spoiled her forehead.

"You might have him come back by way of Crossett's, mamma," suggested Clara, "and bring home the meat."

"Huh," muttered Louise, scornfully. "Do you think old Crossett'd let *him* have it if he wouldn't let me?"

Don looked at the two girls in puzzled silence. Why shouldn't Crossett let him have a quarter's worth of meat? "What's the idea, sis?" he demanded, but in joking tones.

"Yes, tell him, Louise — then the whole town will know it," came from Clara as she went back to her dishwashing.

"Tell the whole world for all I care," replied Louise with a reckless laugh. "Chase along, kid, and never mind the meat. We'll have eggs — Thank goodness, our credit's still good with the hens."

"Won't be if dad doesn't order in some more corn mighty soon," chuckled Don. "The old brahma rooster pretty near wore off his bill trying to peck loose my shoe-buckles this morning."

"We've at least got *them* — as long as they last," sighed Mrs. Blackburn.

"Shoe-buckles, ma?" asked Don mischievously, and then hastened out the door, for he saw his little joke had not been taken in quite the right spirit.

"What in thunder's got into them?" he speculated as he plodded down the dusty, sidewalkless street. "Pa's as black as a thunder-cloud pretty

nigh all the time, and ma's as peevish as pickles. And Clara and Lou—they give me a pain. I don't blame poor Aunt Ella for being out of sorts all the time with those grouchers around."

Aunt Ella—everyone spoke of her always as *poor* Aunt Ella—was a fixture with the Blackburns. In the prosperous days of Mr. Blackburn, she had helped Don's mother through a sickly summer. Just about the time Mrs. Blackburn was up and able to fend for herself again, Aunt Ella—they called her only Ella Sandhill then—had to fall down the cellar steps and dislocate her hip. In the hands of an unskilled doctor the poor woman soon found herself a helpless invalid, and perforce she became "Aunt" to the four young Blackburns. After awhile the hospitality that she first accepted as charity grew into a right, and the whims of the irritable shut-in became a tyranny against which the children all secretly rebelled.

But Don had not gone far along the road before the wrinkles in his forehead turned into a pucker of his lips, and he was soon whistling a lively tune. So lively was it that as he passed along the white-picketed fence of the roadside garden belonging to the home of his best chum,

Ensol Frantzen, it brought a mocking call from the branches of a late black cherry tree just then at its best.

“Birdie want a worm?” laughed a gay young voice and the mischievous face of Ensol’s sister peeped out between the leaves.

“Don’t care if I do — if there’s a ripe cherry wrapped around it? How’s the little treetoad to-day?” he mocked, vaulting lightly over the fence — to be stopped by a perfect hail of hard cherries. One caught him smack in the eye.

“Good enough!” exulted the one he had called a treetoad. “Nobody invited you in. Just stay where you are.”

But Don, rubbing his injured eye, continued to draw nearer, in spite of the fact that the commands to halt grew more urgent as he approached.

“Don’t you dare come a step nearer!” cried an indignant voice.

“What’s the matter?” queried Don, pleasantly, pausing involuntarily, but darting ahead the next instant. A sounding *cr-rack!* and a squeal of feminine dismay, and he saw a blue-clad figure slipping through the limbs — to land heavily but safely in his arms.

“ Gee! ” he gasped in relief, as he set the girl on her feet. “ Gee! ” he gasped again as he stepped back to survey the indignant fifteen-year-old slip of a girl. Her face was red, her hair was tangled, her eyes blazing; she was dressed in a pair of her brother’s discarded overalls.

“ I knew you’d come snooping along if I put them on! ” she stormed. “ That’s all you’re good for. ”

“ I’m right good at eating cherries, too, ” he chuckled, reaching over and helping himself to a bunch that had become tangled in her hair. “ They look nice on you, ” he went on, sticking his tongue in his cheek and regarding her gravely. “ No, really, ” as her nose went up. “ I like ’em on you—I’m not scared of you when you’ve got that kind of a rig on. But when you’re dressed up, with powder on your nose — ”

“ I s’pose you’re just scared to death of me then! ”

“ Am. But where’s Ensol? ”

“ Oh, of course it was Ensol you came after. He’s not at home. ”

“ Where is he? ”

"Down at Crossett's, I guess — listening to Sim Skagway with his wild yarns —"

"Skags back?"

"Back last night. Where've you been? Pa said Sim had a black fox he caught way up north and Sim says the pelt's worth pret'nigh three thousand dollars — one skin! Ma says she don't understand why Sim stopped at three thousand — ten's just as easy to say. He says he caught it — where you going?"

"Down to hear the fox story first hand."

"You mind if I go along? Ma wants me to go down and get some thread —"

"In them things? Not much!" exclaimed Don, but secretly much pleased. There were some who said that Ensol wasn't the only chum Don Blackburn had found in the Frantzen family. At any rate Alice Frantzen, "Al" to both the boys, never lacked for someone to fetch and carry for her.

But Mrs. Frantzen came along just at this point, having overheard the last few sentences, and promptly squelched any notions of a trip together to the store.

"It's enough for one of ye to be wasting your time listening to an old windbag wheezing

away. If you've got nothing better to do," turning her steel-rimmed spectacles sharply on Don, "you have," catching Alice by the straps of her overalls and sending her trotting toward the house.

Don, left to himself, picked a generous capful of cherries and once more betook himself to the road, looking back over his shoulder just as a cherry-stained hand waved at him from the kitchen window. He was about to wave back when a sentence came from close beside the hand in the unmistakable tones of Mrs. Frantzen. "—— the laziest boy in Lac du Chien!" was all he heard, but it was enough to set him hustling off down the road.

The *laziest boy in Lac du Chien*! Well, there wasn't any novelty about the statement. His two sisters had used the same phrase many the time, while his father rarely set him a task without first remarking that it probably would not be done. As for his mother—well, her tongue was often sharper than she meant it to be, and Don's feelings, for all his ready smile and easy-going ways, were sensitive. "Give a dog a bad name if you want him to steal sheep," is an old saying, and it applies pretty well to

boys, too. "Lazy Don" was hardly a name to give a chap great ideals of usefulness.

"Lazy Don" felt something burn in his chest, now, for "Al" had always defended him; she had always said he was dreamy, not lazy. He had a strong notion to go back home and justify her faith. There was that great pile of knotty wood to split up that his father had been after him for these many weeks. But the lure was strong in the other direction. Sim Skagway was the Baron Munchausen of the little town. Every few months he would disappear, north, south, east or west, be gone a month or six, once over a year, to return with tales too thrilling for belief.

He was a prime favorite with the boys, and at the crossroads grocery where he made his headquarters he never lacked for an audience of grown-ups as well. True, they laughed at him openly, but it was an admiring laugh at that. His tales might be all moonshine, as many charged, but they smacked of the open, of daring risks and stirring adventures in woods and waters. Once a city man had come up and had listened a whole summer to Skags' yarns, and had made a barrel of money, so it was said,

writing them down for one of the big magazines.

Sim Skagway had no home, unless Crossett's general store could be called a home, for it was there he held forth when he was not out "on the trail," as he called it. No one knew where he slept; he washed his face when he shaved, which was once a week. He hunted, trapped, peddled soap and mousetraps and such small household articles from door to door, and had even been known to do odd jobs for a stray quarter. Some there were who said Skags, as he was popularly called, had never been farther north than the Canada line, and that what pelts he brought in had been traded for, but Skags only laughed and told a bigger story than ever to show his scorn of all doubters.

He was in the midst of a thrilling account of his capture of the black fox when Don entered; so enrapt were the listeners that no one noticed the newcomer. Skags sat on a goods box to which a back had been nailed; he was puffing vigorously on a villainous pipe held in the corner of his mouth, and his lean, thin-whiskered jaws worked triple time as he talked.

"I tell ye," he was saying, "there ain't many as has be'n any further north than what I've

be'n, and them as has will tell you mighty few black foxes is *ketched*. Happens, once in a while, you get a shot at one, but trap 'em — well, they's mighty few figurin' on that same.

“ How came I to get this'n? ” He waved a stump of a wrist toward the corner of the store, where Don now saw a slatted box behind whose bars a dingy form moved ceaselessly back and forth, back and forth. “ Ef I told the whole story it'd take a week's tellin' and you'd only believe the scant half on it; parts of it I can hardly believe myself — the man don't live that'd follow those same tracks and be here tellin' how he did it.

“ Moresomever, and that's the main thing, I've a notion I've learned the secret o' trappin' the black fox, the trickiest and the val'ablest critter in the white north. With the three thousand I'll git fer that hide I'm going to outfit for a real trip. There's a piece of country up there that's plumb alive with — well, believe me or not, there's full fifty thousand dollars worth of black pelts in a valley no bigger'n this county. There's just one besides me that knows of it — and I guess he won't be tellin' the secret. It's Don Blackburn ” — Don started at hearing his name

brought into the story, but he knew who was meant even before Skags added — “ Handsome Don, the boldest lad that ever packed out of Lac du Chien.”

“ Aye, that he was,” agreed Mac MacCardle, who usually disagreed with Skags for the sake of argument. “ I mind me the last trip he went on. I was one of the four he threw his gallant young life away trying to save. We were short o’ grub, and it was Sandy, my brother, who had a broken leg and couldn’t be moved. It was a blizzard we were in and it was so cold there couldn’t have been any temperature in the thermometer. He slips on his snowshoes like for the pleasure of it, says ‘ I’m off to the post,’ and that was the last mortal man ever saw of the bravest lad on either side of the border.”

“ Tell them how far north you were that day the temp’rature disappeared, Little Mac. And then tell these misbelievers who it was came the day after yer grub give out, and tooken ye all back to the Lac.”

“ True for you, Sim,” nodded Mac. “ I mind me well how ye looked as yer whiskers, froze solid they were, stuck through the dooring. I think it was Bill Greemus yonder that wanted

to kiss yer homely phiz, so tickled he was."

"And who do you suppose told me ye were near to the end, Mac MacCardle and Bill Greemus? The man ye jus' said no mortal man had ever seen again. It was that same Don Blackburn, nigh to freezing, who sent me on to you. 'Go you on,' says he. 'Go you on. I'm a lone man with no chick and no child, while there be eyes weary back home looking for those same four across the snowdrifts.' He would have fought me to his own hurt, and I—I left him. It was a close pinch as it was, and no one could find word of blame for us that we left his body there to the white death. He'd have wanted that; he loved the open, the brave lad."

Alex Crossett, the storekeeper, came from behind the counter. "He paid his shot, did Don Blackburn. A straighter, open-handeder lad never sneaked dried peaches from my baskets. Played hard, worked hard—Handsome Don was sure the finest specimen of a sure enough he-man that ever sighted a rifle. He could out-shoot, out-work, out-rassle, out-dance, and out-fiddle any man I ever see. He stood right up on his hind legs all the time."

It was an old story to Don. He got it at

home and he got it wherever he went. Uncle Don, Handsome Don, for whom he had been named, the pride of the family and of the whole community. Hero of a hundred exploits, to lose his life in the last brave self-sacrifice just told. It had happened the winter his nephew was born. "Name him Don, too," said his father. "If he grows up to be worthy of the name I ask nothing more."

Worthy of the name! Don slunk out of the store, the overpraise of his name-uncle ringing in his ears and flushing his cheeks. Worthy of his name! A thousand times he had been told by word and look how poorly he lived up to the honor. "Lazy Don"—that told the whole story.

CHAPTER II

A THOUSAND DOLLAR DAY DREAM

When Don left Crossett's store it was with the intention of going straight home and tackling that woodpile. A rebellious something in his heart demanded an object upon which to work out his justification. But the sun was just warm enough and the breeze just cool enough, and as he cut through Barton's pasture a saucy red squirrel ran chattering across his path, while he could hear the br-r-r-r of a covey of quail taking flight just the other side of the brush. When a boy has saved up all winter and part of the summer to buy himself a rifle, it isn't in human nature to suppose that a woodpile is going to hold him away from his favorite sport.

No one was in sight as he came noisily in the front door. He looked in at Aunt Ella's door, but she was napping, her steel-rimmed spectacles pushed high on her forehead and her hands folded over the knitting in her lap. So he closed the door quietly and went on up to his attic

bedroom. There stood his rifle in the corner. It was a Marlin six-shot repeater, 30-30 calibre, center fire; the very sight of it made a fellow's fingers itch to curl up around the grip. The picture of the woodpile faded completely from Don's mind; he saw instead the green and gold woods, quiet pools, rustling leaves and grass, and a patch of gray or brown that flashed past the sights of his rifle.

Don had no dog of his own. Years before he had had a shaggy sheep dog that answered to the name of Tip, chiefly because of a white brush at the end of his tail. One day he had snapped at Benny, then a baby of six. True, Benny had stepped on the dog's foot — purposely, it must be confessed — but that did not save poor Tip. From that time on dogs had been denied Don. However, half the dogs in town followed him about, and all that was needed was a shrill whistle as he turned into the woods, to bring half a dozen bounding after him.

But to-day Don wanted to be alone. He did not want even the silent sympathy of his shaggy friends. He scurried at once into the bushy lane that led to Carter's Woods, a heavy stand of timber that extended all the way to St. Louis

River. Rabbits — a dozen at least — bobbed across his path within easy rifle shot, but Don only sent them hurrying on their way with an encouraging shout. These and the squirrels were safe from him till cold weather set in. Then let them look out. A duck would have been another matter, and he expected to bag a few in the marshy edges of the St. Louis if he went that far.

There seemed little likelihood of his tramping so far, however, for no sooner had he reached the cool shadows of the woods than his steps began to lag. A fallen tree barred his way, and he sat down to rest awhile. It wasn't that he was tired; he merely wanted to sit down and think a bit. His mind felt like the camel's back after the last straw had been laid on; he was just about ready to rebel. Then, too, there was a certain satisfaction in thinking of himself as a martyr: scolded at home, laughed at in town, held up to all the other boys of his age as a prime example of what not to be. And Don, Lazy Don, was tired of it all.

But he was not allowed to sit there long and dream. He jumped to his feet with a start as coming down the wind, from the direction of

town, he heard the yelping of a pack of dogs. That deep, long-drawn howl that rose above the yipping of the rest of the pack was Ensol Frantzen's hound Blucher—Bluch, the boys called him. Had it not been for his voice, Don would not have jumped so hastily to his feet, for the rest of the dogs would grow just as excited over a rabbit as a buck deer. But Bluch never gave tongue unless he sniffed real game, and that long howl always meant a hot trail.

But the yelping died down as suddenly as it had begun. Don was puzzled. It was not like Bluch to lose the scent; once he gave tongue he kept it up till the coon was treed or the fox holed. He hung on like grim death. For perhaps five minutes the woods were still as Little Round Lake at sundown. Then, a half mile to the east, the barking began again, but no sound this time from Bluch. Once more there was silence, only to be broken again, this time back in the original direction. Don smiled to himself; he had solved the mystery. These dogs were not following game; they were being held in leash by their masters, who felt that their own notions were more to be trusted than the noses of the pack.

But that did not explain Bluch.

And then something happened. It was all over so quickly that Don, seasoned woodsman and hunter that he was, did not even have time to raise his rifle, much less pull a bead on the object that burst through the copse of hazel-brush only a dozen yards away.

There had been a sudden single deep-throated growl that brought him to attention even before he recognized it as belonging to Bluch. Then came a brief "Yip!" and crashing through the brush came two racing figures. Scarcely two yards ahead of eager Bluch madly dashed a blackish-brown animal running close to the ground, its brush of a tail streaking straight out behind.

In all but color it was a fox. Don saw that in the brief half second before the two disappeared into a heavy-thicketed ravine. The next instant he had set out in chase, guided by the half-whine of Bluch as he reached forward to his prey. Up hill and down they crashed, Don falling farther and farther behind till he at last had to slow down and listen for Bluch's signal.

It was nearly an hour later, and two miles deeper into the pine woods that he came upon

Bluch, whining disappointedly as he trotted back and forth across a marshy glade, trying to pick up the scent.

“Too bad, old fellow,” encouraged Don as he patted his heaving sides. “You sure made one grand fight of it. But you were only running for the sport of it, while the other boy was running for his life. So he gave you the slip when he came to the Wets, did he? Wise old fox. He was heading for here all the time, but you didn’t know it. Let’s go home.”

But Bluch had no such idea, and Don finally had to grab him by the collar and drag him away. Not till they were well a half mile toward home could he safely let go of the dog. Every now and then the racket of the other dogs would break out, at which Bluch would arch the hair on his neck, with a low growl — of disgust, Don felt sure.

It was beginning to grow dark in the woods when boy and dog finally reached the thin fringe of stunted pines that marked the beginnings of civilization. They came out at the base of the triangular tract of ground at whose point stood the home of his nearest chum, Ensol Frantzen. Bluch bounded off, sniffing his waiting supper, no

doubt. After hesitating a moment, Don finally squirmed under the barb-wire fence, refusing the short-cut through the meadows in the hope of a chance word with Ensol.

Sure enough, as he opened the creaky gate that shut off the so-called barnyard—the Frantzens had neither cattle, horses nor pigs—from the monster garden, he heard a boisterous hail from the back porch:

“Chee, Don, you sure missed it. Where you been? Hunting? What’d you get besides back? Say, you should have been in town—*some* excitement while it lasted!”

“What’s the idea, Ense? A puzzle contest? What happened?”

“What didn’t? Mayor Pitts fell through Coles Brothers’ window. Mike Holderan pretty nigh broke his leg trying to get out of the way of Skags; and Skags broke the hind wheels clean off Mrs. Dwiddie’s wash-wagon. Bill Cadler’s mule ran away, in the excitement, and they haven’t caught him yet. They’re tracking him by pieces of the cart scattered along the pike. Those who weren’t yelling like mad, or running like wild Indians, were holding their sides trying to keep from dying in a fit of laughing.”

“ Is it time for me to guess the answer now? ”

“ You can’t guess it. But if you could *catch* it I guess you could call to-morrow yesterday and the folks’d believe you till next week.”

“ I see,” commented Don gravely. “ You’ve caught it yourself.”

“ Eh? ” blankly.

“ Now just pretend that the week has gone by, that’s a good fellow. Try a little United States on me. If I could catch what? ”

“ Sim Skagway’s black fox, that’s what! ”

“ Did he —— ” growing almost as excited as Ensol. “ You don’t mean to tell me that Skags let that three thousand dollar pelt get away from him? ”

“ Not exactly. You see, Skags and Mac MacCardle got to argufying as they always do, and Mac kind of had it on Skags. Sim had been gassing along—you know how he does—and he’d pretty nigh told his whole life’s history. So Mac started in to rile him. He’d been markin’ down figures as Skags talked, and according to his dope, Skags’d have to be about ninety-eight years old to have been all the places he said he’d been as long as he said he’d been there.

“ Well, Skags got sore, and first thing you

know he'd up and pushed Mac off his soap box. Mac fell against the fox cage and cracked a couple of the slats. But the fox just scared back into the corner. Then Skags got a hammer and saw and nails and started to tinker up the cage. He ain't exactly awkward, you know, but he has a knack of mislicking once in a while. He did it then. He not only busted a slat, but he shied the hammer head into the coop. Maybe it hit the fox. I dunno. I know the fox hit the doorway, like a streak of black lightning.

“ And then the fun began. That fox dodged back and forth, down the street, about fifty dogs after him inside three seconds. Catch him! They hadn't a chance. Old Bluch, if he'd been there, he'd 'a' shown 'em how, but there ain't a real hunting dog in town. Leastways, that's what Skags said afterward. That, and a lot of other things that you can just about imagine.”

Don had listened to the rapid-fire account almost open-mouthed.

“ Three thousand dollars! ” he said, opening his hand before him as if he held that amount.

“ So Skags says. Dad laughed when I told him. But all the samey, Sim Skagway stood right down there in town, in front of the mayor

and the Baptist minister, and said he'd give a thousand dollars cash to the man that brung him hide or fox. 'Money talks,' I says to dad. 'Sure,' he laughed at me, 'but dead foxes carry no tales.' "

"One thousand dollars," Don repeated mechanically.

"What's the idea? You stand there as if you expected somebody was going to come along and put that thousand in your hand."

Don dropped his hand, but still stood as if dazed. Ensol looked at him with mock anxiety. "Come out of it," he urged, as Don once more lifted his hand and looked dreamily at the cupped palm. "What's the matter with the mit?"

"Matter? Ensol, I had a thousand dollars in there this afternoon, and I wasn't wide enough awake to shut up my fist. I saw the black fox!"

"You did!"

"Bluch was running him down, nose and tail, and they zipped past scarcely a dozen feet away. I was dreaming, or I'd have been ready."

"Well, you want to have your thousand dollar dreams at night—yes, ma, I'm coming.

"No, I'm not planning any night-hawking. I'm just out here getting in the kindling. Beat

it," he said to Don. "Ma's still sore about our little coon-hunt night before last."

He disappeared in the dusk, and a second or two later Don heard the screen door of the kitchen go "wee-awk," as his chum went in with a hastily gathered armful of kindling.

"A thousand dollars!" breathed Don, turning homeward, his pace quickened a bit by the news. "And I had it in my hand."

All the rambling Blackburn house was dark save one room, the sitting room. As Don passed its windows, on the way to the kitchen door, he looked in and saw all the family gathered there, even to Aunt Ella. His father sat at the table, his head in his hands. Something in his attitude made Don pause, there close beside the open window. His first mischievous impulse to stick his head in between the curtains and give the folks a little fright left his thoughts as he became aware of the lively discussion going on within.

"No," his father mumbled, a dull sort of desperation in his voice, "I'm cleaned out. Everything goes, even the house here, unless I can raise a thousand dollars by January first. I haven't the slightest hope of being able to do that, mortgaged as the place is."

“But wouldn’t your partners——” began Lou, but Mr. Blackburn shook his bowed head “——well, couldn’t you borrow it on your own—a—a——” She paused for lack of the proper word.

Mr. Blackburn raised his head and looked slowly about from face to face. “You don’t seem to understand,” he said slowly, “that I’m a—bankrupt.”

He rose and began to pace the room, in short nervous strides. “It’s no use. I’ve schemed every way before the crash came and since. There’s absolutely no place to turn. Even your uncle Roswell refused me.” He was silent a moment, then as he came back and dropped heavily into his chair he asked suddenly:

“Where’s Donald?”

The answer came from them all, in a single word but one that carried a wealth of disapproval and criticism:

“Hunting.”

After a little, Clara added: “At least his rifle’s gone.”

Aunt Ella’s shrill cackle rose at that. “He’s got his uncle’s name and all his faults—and that’s all.”

Don, standing outside the window, expected no less than that from Aunt Ella. He was fair enough to admit to himself that her comment would have been just as caustic had any other member of the family been discussed. But he was not prepared for his father's swift:

"Confound the boy. No sense of duty whatever. Well, he can soon get out and hustle for himself — hustle or starve."

"Don't worry; he'll starve if he can't get along without hustling," came from Clara. Don had teased her a good deal that morning, so he did not hold the spiteful speech against her. But his father was talking again.

"We named him after your Uncle Don — the finest boy that ever I knew. If he was alive to-day, I wouldn't be standing here in debt and dishonor. I've appealed to the boy from every angle I could think of, but I can't seem to stir him up. No sense of loyalty, of family honor, of ambition — I'm about ready to give up."

"He's the laughing stock of the town," was Lou's contribution. "I can't get a lick of help out of him — not even to bringing in the wood."

"I don't see as this is helping *us* out any," began Don's mother mildly. "I s'pose the boy

ain't as serious minded as he might be. I sometimes wonder if he ain't just about as loyal to the family as the rest of us are to him."

Don felt a sudden rush of hot tears, and he wanted to go in and thank his honest-hearted little mother, but the next instant he was glad, with an angry hurt sort of gladness, that he had not obeyed the impulse.

"Humph!" exclaimed his father, ill-naturedly. "He'll find out soon enough that other folks aren't going to meet him two-thirds-way all the time. He isn't worth his salt here at home; he's the cause of all the trouble and quarreling here. I don't expect him to help out any in our trouble—he hasn't got the backbone of a flea—but he's got to earn his own living, what living he gets."

"But, father——" began Mrs. Blackburn pleadingly.

"That's the last word. I made up my mind to it to-day, as I sat figuring over the wreck of my business. We can't have any dead-weight. And that's all he'll ever be, and him bearing the most honored name in Lac du Chien. Why, down in town, they've taken to calling all the stray curs by that name, and all on his account."

Mr. Blackburn resumed his restless pacing to and fro. Finally he spoke. "I've threshed it over and over. With a thousand dollars I could save the place, and in the spring start over again."

And outside the window an overgrown sixteen-year-old boy muttered bitterly to himself:

"And I was just about to go in and tell them how I had let that thousand slip through my fingers out there in the woods!"

CHAPTER III

THE AWAKENING OF DON BLACKBURN

Don cautiously opened the screen door and slipped noiselessly across to the tiny door that opened into the back stairway. There were boards in those winding steps that creaked, but Don knew just which they were, and so no one was the wiser for his stealthy escape to his own room. True, he was hungry, and the sniff he took of the supper held to warm for him on the back of the stove, was almost maddening, but there was a feeling in the boy's heart that was stronger than hunger.

Every boy has had that feeling at least once in his life. It is coupled with thoughts of running away, of making a fortune by some hazy but highly satisfactory means, and of coming back again, greenbacks simply oozing from pockets, to say: "This is the *man* you scolded and laughed at. This is the lazy, moony fellow nobody would ever hire — this the impudent,

disobedient, good-for-nothing " — but why go on? You know the sensation.

Don had it — hard. There was a register in the corner of the room, where in the winter time most welcome warmth came up from the big stove below. He could hear his mother, pleading to keep her boy at home. Don smiled grimly to himself, a smile that had tears in it. None could be sharper in censure of him, yet the mother heart could not give up her lad no matter how unworthy he might be. Then came his father's voice, rough in a last denial:

" You'll be making him out an angel next. He is nothing but a care and an expense — has been all his life. Worked like a good fellow last spring? Yes, I know he did. And why? For his own selfish pleasure. Bought himself a gun, the best made — and me needing the money. I don't begrudge the boy his fun; but there's a time for it — buying cartridges when we can't pay our grocery bill! Let him take his old rifle and go out and see if he can shoot up that thousand dollars I need! "

Don sat up with a start. It was part honest anger, and part a sort of thrill of determination. A thousand dollars — a thousand dollars! The

phrase had kept bobbing up at every turn. The black fox — his price was a thousand. The mortgage on the house — that was a thousand too. Like an electric spark, the two ideas came together in Don's brain. He jumped to his feet; his heels clicked together. "I'll do it!" he exclaimed half aloud. "That fox is my ransom — it's the price of my — my — self-respect." The last word came slowly, for in the boy's mind was forming a new estimate of himself, an estimate expressed in terms of the opinions of other people. "I guess I haven't amounted to any too much," he accused himself. "I've been lazy and dreamy, and selfish too, I s'pose. And I've sure got credit for all my lacks," he added bitterly. "But I'm just man enough to change their everlasting minds for them, that's all."

He waited till he was sure all the rest of the family had gone to bed. His mother, he knew, would be sitting down there in the dark until she had made certain that her boy was safely home, so he tiptoed quietly down in his stocking feet to where he knew her chair was standing.

"That you, son?" she asked as he crossed the threshold.

"I heard it all," he said by way of answer.

“I’m going away, mother. It’s the only way.”

“Best wait till morning, Donnie, and talk it over. Your father is terribly upset to-night, and small wonder. He didn’t mean it as harshly as it sounded.”

“But it’s all true, mother, and more yet is. If I go now, to-night, I’ve got a chance to redeem myself. You won’t hold me back, will you?” There was a new ring in the boy’s voice, new at least to his mother. She rose and lighted the lamp and carried it out into the kitchen.

“I saved you a bite of supper,” she said, beginning to carry it over to the table. “We can talk while you eat it—you must be hungry.”

“I sure am,” he agreed with boyish vigor. “And I want to fill up well before I hit the long trail.”

“What is your plan, Don?”

“I’d rather not tell you, mother; it’s all too hazy anyway. I’m just going to make good—that’s all the plan I have. And I want to start now, while the prickles are still running up and down my backbone. No,” as his mother rose and began fumbling in a familiar cracked sugar bowl that stood on the mantel beside the kitchen clock, “no, I won’t take any money, mother.

I've got a little, and where I'm going I won't need it. And when I do I'll earn it.

"There," as he scraped off the last morsel of food on the plate; "I leave at least one clean record. You'll tell father and Lou and Clara and Aunt Ella good-bye? Tell Clara and Lou they can divide my pelts — they can each get a muff out of the skunk hides. And, mother, will you do just one little thing for me?"

"Surely —"

"Tell Alice — Alice Frantzen, you know — that — well, just tell her that I — that *you* think I'm going to make good.

"That's all, I guess," rising and taking a long look around. "I've got my gun and my mack-inaw, and I'll wear my heavy boots. Good-bye, mother, and don't you worry about me. I'll bring you back a boy you will be proud of. And don't let father think he drove me away — if he feels sorry because I've gone. He just helped me to wake up to myself."

He stooped over her and kissed her, then strode resolutely out into the night. His last thought as he walked away was that this was the first time, since he was a tiny tad, that his mother had kissed him.

As soon as he was well away from the house, he sat down and drew on his high lace boots, which he had caught up from beside the stove, where they had been drying out from his last excursion. Then he put on his heavy mackinaw, for the night had a nip of cold in it. In his pockets were two full boxes of cartridges, as well as a substantial sandwich his mother had slipped in. With these, and his gun, and something like two dollars in small change, he set out to conquer the world.

He whistled, guardedly, but with a shrill note that carried far. A patter of hurrying feet announced the answer to his signal, and an instant later a black muzzle nosed his hand inquiringly.

"Want to go along, Curly?" recognizing a dog who had neither home nor master. Curly gave a low bark of acceptance, and the two trotted briskly away from town.

Don had told the truth when he had said that he had no plan. But now that he was out among the friendly trees his thoughts were busy. That first wild plan to capture Sim Skags' black fox had steadied down to a calm survey of the situation. Don was a born woodsman; he had hunted

foxes and knew their ways. But here was a new kind of fox — a new animal entirely, he reminded himself. Curly was no good on a difficult trail, and this one was already hours old. It meant matching his wits against the cunning of the keenest, craftiest mind in the forest, and the odds were all in favor of four-foot. All but one, that is.

Don had the advantage of knowing the country. He knew, as the black fox did not, that north of him, an impassable barrier between him and his native haunts of the Barrens or the White North farther on perhaps, lay the St. Louis River. It turned and twisted, but always, for hundreds of miles, its silver breadth cut off escape. The homing instinct is strong; Don counted on it. He knew that the black fox would pause many times and sniff the winds that would be coming down from the snow country. That he would gaze longingly across the river as he stood on its low banks; but that always he would be following its snake-like course in the hope that just around the next bend would lie the way home. It was fox nature; and Don was a born hunter.

He might have to follow the trail ten miles, twenty, fifty — somewhere he would overtake the

fugitive. Curly would help him, and as for the rest—well, Don did not lack self-confidence.

But Don's plan was not to go through in quite that way. Hardly had they reached the woods before Curly began to show signs of uneasiness. Every little while he would stop and look longingly over his shoulder at the last dim lights of town. Once he raised a melancholy howl that almost startled Don out of his wits. The howl was answered, and Curly no longer made any pretense of following the hurrying boy. He began sniffing the ground and started off on short dashes as if in pursuit of some mighty animal. He would pause suddenly, growl, and then come trotting back to the boy. But Don noticed that these excursions grew longer and longer, the return more reluctant, and when finally no dog came bustling through the underbrush, he smiled grimly to himself and did not send even a coaxing whistle in pursuit.

“Even a stray dog hasn't faith in me. And a dog will hang on where people won't. I guess *they* were right.”

He sat on a tree that had come crashing to earth in some past storm, held in a slanting position by its close-growing companions. “Just

like me," the boy admitted. "I was a dead-weight on the folks. They were keeping me from dropping down, clean out of sight." He rose and threw back his shoulders as he stepped off briskly, deeper into the woods. "Not like me either. I've got good, substantial roots, and I'm going to grow."

But his hopes were not quite so high now. Trailing a lone fox with nothing to guide him but eyesight, promised little chance of success. Still, he could not well turn back, and morning might give him some clew. He could at least follow to the point where Bluch had lost the trail the day before. There he would have to wait for daylight.

Once he lost his way, and once the sharp bark of a fox sent him darting, all atremble, through the low thicket of a hazel copse. But the tiny form that tore madly over the brow of the hill at his approach was not that of the coveted black fox. *He* was big, almost as large as the timber wolves that were thick through this section. His black coat and proud, glossy brush marked him unmistakably.

So it was well past midnight before Don reached the stretch of marsh where he had found

Bluch vainly trying to pick up the lost scent. "Here's a case where eyes are better than nose," chuckled Don. "When daylight comes I'll find old Blackie's toe-prints in the mud or I miss my guess. In the meanwhile, it's me for the hay — or anything that listens like bed."

He finally made himself a nest of spruce boughs, and threw himself into their fragrant depths. He regretted not having brought along a blanket. But "that's what comes when a fellow starts off with his nose in the air and his whole anatomy in the clouds," he sighed. "I could do a whole lot worse than this."

Sleep came quickly, for he was pretty well fagged out in both body and mind by the day's events. He slept soundly, but the first peep of sunrise found him astir. "Now for breakfast!" he cried gayly. "A few soft-boiled eggs, a cup of hot coffee, some toast, a little more toast, please, and a doughnut to finish off with." Saying which, he pulled the lone sandwich from his pocket, pretty badly squeezed from having been slept on, and proceeded to munch it. "Ah," he chuckled, "that last doughnut was sure fine, although I have a suspicion that the hole was burned a little on the edges. Oh, well, a little

strong coffee will soon wash the taste away.”

So he drank some coffee — the kind that comes bubbling up, cold and clear, from beneath a clump of mossy rocks in a deep, shady woods. The last morsel of bread had disappeared. Here he was, his face turned away from home, without a scrap of food. “ And I didn’t have enough sense to bring along some salt in case I should see a rabbit — not that I’d try to drop it on his tail. It’s a wonder I knew enough to bring matches. But salt I’ll have to have. Maybe I can strike a trapper’s hut somewhere along the river.”

All this was said aloud, for the loneliness of the big pines that whispered together endlessly, but always to themselves, never to him, was beginning to wear on his nerves. The woods does that to men who go it alone.

But now it was broad daylight, as broad as it ever gets in the green-curtained pine forests. Don looked about him with sharpening gaze. Somewhere through the maze of vine and creeper and matted swamp grass and muddy islands and watery byways, a fox had passed. In some unguarded moment he had left the seal and sign of his passing. If keen eyes could find that hidden

footprint, Don Blackburn was determined that here and now the trail of the black fox should commence.

It was a long while before his painstaking search was rewarded, and even then he was not sure. A single footprint showed beside a loose bit of rock, a footprint that dug in deep at the claws as if the rock had turned under a hasty step and so betrayed the fugitive. Still, argued the pursuer, it might easily have been a prowling wolf, or a coon, so little of the paw showed.

Don stood on the spot and let his eye pick out a course that he would have followed had he been the fox. He saw where a shallow but swift-flowing marsh-brook twisted along, finally bringing up against the verge of the marsh, where a broad reach of woodland meadow stretched invitingly into the blue haze of the hills.

"That's the route!" exclaimed the boy. "That's it, for two reasons. One, he'd follow the running water, the foxy old trail-loser. Moreover, he'd sniff that prairie yonder, and he knows there's birds will be nesting there. I'll take a chance on the short-cut anyway."

Perhaps, had Don allowed himself to think

over long of his slim chance of trailing so cunning a quarry as a fox, without a dog, he would have given up the chase. But it's easy enough to stick to a plan when no other presents itself. Don had left home with a promise and a determination to make good; the black fox had already come to represent just that. At any rate, he would not give up until he had exhausted every woods trick at his command.

Now he took a short run and cleared the narrow brook with an easy jump, landing well up on the solid bank. He scrutinized every step of the way, but if the fox had come this way he had held to the water. When he reached the bend of the brook that edged the grassy meadow, he felt his heartbeats quicken at sight of a break in the wall of grass where some heavy-bodied animal had struggled through. The trail could not be very old, for the sun and the wind would soon raise the trampled grass.

But his joy was short-lived, for he had followed the plain track less than a hundred yards when it widened out and then disappeared. A draggled bunch of feathers told the reason for the stop here; the fox had found a breakfast among the grasses. But where, having satisfied

his long fast, he had gone to, Don could only guess at, with a perplexed shake of his head. In all directions, as far as his eye could reach, the ripe grasses nodded in unbroken evenness. Here was a genuine puzzle.

But Don soon solved it — on hands and knees. He began a microscopic examination of the incoming trail. He had not gone far before he had learned the secret of the fox's disappearance. The grass had been bent both ways. The fox had cut back over his own trail. He had gone back to the water — which way after that, it would be hard to guess. Don at once set about answering that riddle too. He cut back to the edge of the meadow, where he found, within a hundred feet or so, a narrow margin of firm sand. Along it slowly he trotted, his eyes alert for the slightest scratch in the smooth surface. At last he found it, the mark of claws that barely broke through the sand. All excited now, he hurried along, the trail plain before him. His first eager trot had steadied down into a loose-jointed Indian lope that carried him along at good speed with little effort.

But suddenly he stopped dead still, and stood looking intently about, sniffing the breeze. Smoke,

and with it an aroma that brought a pang to the inner man—coffee. It was a long while before his keen eyes detected the thin twist of gray film that funneled up through the trees of a shallow valley only a few hundred yards off the trail he had been following. Coffee meant, Don knew, a wayfarer not long out of town, for tea is the universal beverage of those who make long journeys in the Northwest Country. Here was a chance, perhaps, to borrow the pinch of salt and the handful of meal that would enable him to stick to his task. Coffee, too, was not to be despised, or tea, and beans or bacon would not come amiss.

He looked regretfully at the line of footprints stretching ahead, and then broke hastily for the trees. Just within their fringe he saw the smoke of a smoldering camp fire, scattered about it the preparations for a meal that was to be more varied than choice. Most of it came apparently from paper-wrapped parcels; there was a hunk of bacon, three eggs, the end of a loaf of bread, two frankfurters, a sad-looking piece of cheese, a mashed piece of apple pie, and a number of greasy looking packets still unwrapped. A three-legged cooking crane straddled the fire, and

among the coals nestled a well-blackened lard pail filled with a blackish liquid that was no doubt responsible for the tantalizing odor.

Don scrutinized the motley assortment in perplexity that bordered on disgust. There was an air of untidiness about the whole lay-out that seemed out of place here in the big, clean woods. He looked about, hoping to discover the author of this blot on the landscape, but the place was deserted. He drew nearer and finally decided to rest a bit on the big log that formed a sort of background to the scene, and there await the return of the owner.

He had sat there perhaps ten minutes, almost dozing, when of a sudden he was startled into complete wakefulness by a raucous voice that exclaimed:

“Get out o’ here, ye infernal pup, or I’ll brain ye!”

Don turned, for an alarmed instant thinking that the threat had been directed at him. But ——

“Ye will get under my feet! Take that!” and the sound of a dull thud told him that some other had been meant. Still, his nerves were somewhat on edge as he peered through the trees. A shaggy, rough-looking man, a tramp,

if appearances were to be trusted, came lurching out of the timber, a fresh-caught trout held by the gills in one hand, a dog as shaggy as his master trailing along and stretching eager jaws toward the fish. The man was just about to fetch his four-footed companion another thwack when he looked up and saw his visitor. For a full minute he stared at Don, drawing slowly nearer. Then his thick lips parted in a grin that revealed tobacco-stained snags.

“ Well I’m danged ! ” he said unexpectedly. “ And he told me ye was a gal ! ”

CHAPTER IV

HANK CLEM'S PRISONER

For an instant Don's astonishment at this queer salutation was too great to find expression in words. Finally he did manage to gasp, "Howdy," and then fell silent again, watching the newcomer with feelings that bordered close on distrust.

"Huh," grunted the man, then: "Howdy yerself. Young Blackburn, eh?"

"Yes — Don Blackburn. But how did you know?"

"Livin' image of yer dad — when I knew him. That is, some eighteen year ago. Still foller the trail, does he?" with some show of friendly interest.

"Still follow — are you sure you mean *my* father. He's a lawyer — always been, I guess."

"Don Blackburn a lawyer? Why ——"

"Oh, *he's* my uncle, my dad's brother. But he's dead — been dead nearly seventeen years ——"

“Not the Don Blackburn I knew — and he’s the picture of ye. My bunky Slithers White ran across him not three year ago up in the Barrens — but what you doin’ up here in the uncut? Where d’ye live?”

“Hunting. Lac du Chien,” answered Don shortly. The man’s shifty glances filled him with a vague uneasiness.

“Lac du Chien? You never left there this morning. What you up to, kid, eh? You don’t have to come this far to find hunting — and the law’s on just about everything now anyhow.”

“Why — I — I ——” Don fell silent, hardly knowing just what to answer, since he had no desire to tell the truth. But the man sensed the fact that Don was hiding something. He leered as he drew near and thrust his repulsive face close to the boy’s.

“Ran away, heh?” he jeered, hitting the bull’s-eye the first shot. “Goin’ out to shoot bears and redskins, I suppose.”

Don did not answer, and the man at once decided that he had guessed right. His leer lost its good nature. “Dad’s a lawyer, eh? Got plenty o’ cash, I suppose?” He paused

abruptly, then asked, just as abruptly, "When did you leave home?"

"Last night," answered Don before he thought, then regretted his frankness, for a cunning look came into the man's eyes, though he quickly, with a great show of hospitality, invited Don to share his breakfast. Don had no desire to spend any more than the few minutes that would be necessary to barter the fellow out of a handful of salt, but there was something about the man's manner of invitation that told Don he would avoid trouble by accepting.

So he pretended a friendliness he did not feel, and accepted the least messy portion of the breakfast the man dished up. The fish, to the great disappointment of the dog, was to be reserved for dinner. Don soon made friends with the shaggy cur, who was evidently a mongrel, but who just as evidently had good blood in him, as an alert air testified.

"Name's Husky — Husk for short, 'cause he's got a lot of good points inside that shaggy shell o' his. He's not a husky, though. Malemute, he is, part, most plain purp. Had him a month. He'll make a good dog when I once get him broke in."

Don had a feeling that the breaking in consisted largely of blows and curses. The spirit of the dog was being slowly broken, that was evident, but the way the hair on his neck roughed up showed that he had not been completely cowed.

As Don ate, finding it hard work in spite of his hunger, the man carried on a steady stream of conversation. The more he talked, the bigger his yarns grew. He had done everything and been everywhere, it would seem. From Nome, Alaska, to New Orleans—no, from Magellan Straits to the Pole—he had adventured, the hero of a thousand exploits. Don was distinctly bored. He paid less and less attention to the man's story, and little enough to the man. A sudden growl from the dog aroused him to a realization of his carelessness, but it was too late.

The man had walked over to where Don had leaned his rifle against the big log. It was closer to him than it was to the man, but Don was sitting. The man turned as Don did, and the boy looked the burly man fearlessly in the eye. The dog growled again.

"Confounded pup!" snarled the man. "All the same, young feller, I guess I'll take care

of that gun fer you. I'm thinkin' you're hardly old enough to be roamin' at large——" he lunged forward as Don made a move as if to jump up. "Jist set down," he exulted, snatching up the rifle and pulling it under his arm, ready for instant use. "Now we can talk business, and maybe you'll be able to pay attention to what I'm sayin'."

"Why—I—a——"

"Yah," snorted the man. "Hank Clem's nobody's fool. I could see ye sayin' to yerself: 'Wonder when the old fool's goin' to dry up.' Wal, you jist set yer mind to rest, son; ef that dad o' yourn is the man I take him fer, he'll pay me a pretty piece o' change fer bringin' ye back—an' back yer a-goin', fast as I can take ye."

Don realized that nothing he could say would change the tramp's notions, and he made up his mind to seize the first half chance and fight it out. The chance came through Husk. He had been stalking about, ears up, neck hair raised, growling under his breath. He came close to Clem, who could not resist the temptation to take a kick at the dog. It proved to be the one too many, for Husk, whirling with a quickness one

would never have given him credit for, sank his teeth in the man's leg.

He was hardly an instant ahead of Don, who, however, made for the arm that held the rifle. Then the fight was on. But Clem was a powerful hulk of a man, toughened by a hard life. So, though Husk worried at his leg, protected by the heavy boot, and Don wrenched and tugged, Clem soon had the upper hand. Catching the dog a back-heel kick, he lifted him high in the air and sent him crashing into the fire. Before the dog could come back, the man had torn his arm free from Don's clutch; before the boy knew what had happened he lay flat on his back, the burly tramp sitting astride his stomach and ready to give him either fist at the slightest sign of resistance.

But Don did not move. Truth to tell, it was not fear that made him lie so still; it was the uncleanness of the man, doubly repulsive now that he was so close. Clem grinned triumphantly down upon his victim, and then half rose, keeping one knee on Don's chest while he groped behind him. A grunt of satisfaction came from him as his reaching fingers encountered a length of heavy cord from one of the packages. With a dexterous twist of his powerful muscles he flipped

Don over as if he had been a naughty child. The maneuver brought a growl from Husk, who was only waiting his chance; but the man paid no attention. He drew both Don's hands behind him and knotted the cord securely about his wrists.

"Git up!" he commanded, accompanying the words with a blow in the side that made Don cringe. "Back up ag'in that tree."

Don had a strong impulse to trust to his heels, and had there been any reasonable cover he would have risked it, even with the rifle in Clem's hands; but the timber was sparse. So he stalked sullenly over to the big tree and stood with his back against it. Clem roped his feet tightly against the trunk and then cut the first cords and repeated the operation with his hands.

"I guess that'll hold ye fer awhile," jeered the man with evident satisfaction. "I'll leave ye to yer thoughts while I drift on back to the river. I've got a dug-out cached somewheres a mile or so along here—I'll let you have the pleasure of paddling me back to—Lac du Chien, is it?"

Don did not answer, but the man was in high good humor with himself and chattered on as

he made preparations for his departure. "I'll be back in a hour or so," he said with mock sympathy. "I hope you don't git lonesome or nothin' — you'll find plenty o' grub in the pantry in case if ye git hungry. So long."

He disappeared from Don's sight, calling Husk, who was apparently disposed to remain behind. After a few minutes the crashing of the brush ceased. Don was alone in the big woods — alone, and tied hand and foot to a tree. In a short time his captor would return; like a runaway schoolboy he would be led back to his father — Don ground his teeth at the thought. He *must* escape. But how?

How would you go about it to free yourself, if your hands were tied behind you around the trunk of a tree, and your ankles were laced close against its base? Probably you'd do as the donkey did in the old riddle about the load of hay on the far side of the *unswimmable* river. You'd give it up. That's what Don did.

But after awhile he found that just giving it up wasn't enough. His muscles began to ache unbearably. His arms felt as if they were being torn from their sockets, and the veins in his feet seemed about ready to burst, so tight were the

bonds. He felt suddenly dizzy and sagged forward the scant inch or two that the span of his arms would allow.

The keen twinge of pain that shot up from his lacerated ankles brought him out of his stupor, and once more he tried to regain his balance, for now he was hanging forward. The effort brought excruciating agony; the twist of the rope about his ankles rolled the flesh up into a long welt that had to be squeezed past. But once he stood erect again there was some measure of relief, for in the new position his feet were a few inches farther apart. He tried to see if he could move them a little farther still, but the attempt sent the blood pumping into his numbed feet and the pain of it seemed to shoot up his limbs and into the base of his brain in a wild nerve-shriek of protest. So he rested, if such suffering could be called rest.

But soon the new position grew as unbearable as the other had been. His taut nerves rebelled; a sort of convulsion passed through his muscles and his body jerked involuntarily with a spasmodic lunge. His feet were a little farther apart now and farther around the side of the tree; the rope seemed to be looser, perhaps because the

flat side of his ankle was now against the trunk.

His brain was whirling, but through its wild fever came a sudden hope. Perhaps he could work his feet around till they were on opposite sides of the tree, and perhaps, if he could stand the pain, he might be able to throw his knees out far enough to let his body hunch down until his fingers could reach the knots that bound his ankles.

The first attempt to carry out the wild plan brought an increase of suffering that left him nerveless. After a long rest he tried it again, gradually, stopping when the pain reached the breaking point. Hair-line by hair-line, the width of a blade of grass gained at the cost of inconceivable agony, he worked his feet apart. The cord seemed like a searing iron, and his wrists were raw and bleeding from rubbing against the rough bark.

At last—it must have been half an hour he struggled—his feet were close-bound on opposite sides of the tree-trunk. Now for the final effort!

He tried to bend his knees, to let his body sag downward. The pain forced a scream to his bleeding lips. The rope pinched up a fold of flesh on his ankles that held him helpless to

move. If he could get the rope past that bunched-up skin he had a chance.

It would take more than courage.

He shut his eyes, and his teeth closed deep into his lip. With a moan that was half desperation and half a sudden weakness that came over him, he let himself fall forward. His knees hinged together like a pair of jackknives; his flayed wrists burned as they slid along the bark. His ankles were live, agony-shot nerve-centers. A spasm of torture flashed over him—the sky turned red. He fainted dead away.

But the painfulness of his cramped position was too great to allow him to remain in blessed unconsciousness. He slowly came back to a dull realization of his plight. He had lunged downward. His fingers, feeling strangely unlike his own, were within a few inches of the knot that held his foot-rope. He managed to hunch down the remaining space and numbly felt the twist of the rope.

After a long time he regained a slight measure of control over his dead hands, and began weakly picking at the knot. It was a hard knot the man had tied, and Don's struggles had tightened the bite. His fingernails were soon torn and

bleeding and still he was no nearer release. And then his heart almost stopped beating!

The next few minutes were almost delirious ones, for each second it seemed that the next one would set him free.

And then the last knot opened under the strain and, his feet suddenly released, he pitched forward till his arm joints almost gave way under the strain.

It was some time before he could stand up, and the suffering of the first moments of restored circulation was almost unbearable. At last he stood erect.

Don carried a sheath-knife in his belt. It was no small task to work it loose—by a thousand twists and turns, by bearing up sharply with his leg, and doubling up his body, but at last, sheath and all, it lay against the base of the tree. After that it was an easy matter to pull the blade from the leather and drive its keen point far into the hard soil, edge away from the tree.

A few careful touches of the cords against the razor-like edge and he was free!

Don felt weak with the reaction. He tottered a few steps and then his legs gave out under him. The blood began to flow through his limbs

once more, bringing with it a pricking and tingling as of a thousand needles jabbing him through. And then his feet began to swell. He wanted to take off his shoes, but realized that he would never be able to get them on again. Moreover, he did not know at what instant the tramp might come threshing through the brush to take him prisoner again.

His eyes roved hastily over the camp equipment, lighting with joy when he discovered his own rifle leaning against the big log. Near it was a baking powder can, which he opened, to find the very thing he had most need of — salt. He did not wait on ceremony, but poured himself out a generous half of it, “to pay for mistreatment,” Don said in self-defense. An end of a loaf of bread caught his eye, and he appropriated that too. Then, throwing his gun up under his arm, he set off as briskly as his tortured feet would permit.

Don hit at once for the tiny stream along whose margin he had followed the trail of the fox earlier in the morning. He had no great idea of being able to catch up the scent again — what woodsman would expect to follow a fox-scent hours and hours old? Rather he made for the water with

the same thought in mind that the fox himself must have had; he wanted to elude pursuit. For Clem had Husk, and the dog would undoubtedly nose out the flight of the escaped prisoner. "But he'll have a better nose than I give him credit for if he can follow me," promised Don grimly. "I won't leave any more trail than a fish."

He barely paused as he reached the little stream, to notice that the fox had continued on that way. Into the knee-deep water he plunged and down its winding current he splashed his way at a good gait. Half a mile brought him to a tufted marsh, which in turn led him to a patch of high ground. Beyond that was a lake. Its crystal-clear depths promised fish, but Don was too fearful of pursuit to pause. He followed its rounding shore till a noisy brook once more gave him a chance to put greater distance between him and the camp. A gleam of silver through a heavy patch of timber attracted his attention—it looked like the St. Louis. Sure enough, the brook bent over in that direction. Feeling safe now, he cut across and in less than ten minutes stood on the banks of a fair-sized river that could be none other than the stream from whose banks he had caught many a fish.

He sat down to rest—and think. “Great little fortune hunter I am,” he said sourly. “I’ve sure bungled everything all up. Lost my fox and the thousand dollars—and all for the sake of a pinch of salt. I flunked out as a hunter, so I guess I’ll go fishing.”

But, as it turned out, he did not. He had already got out the silk line he carried in his inside coat pocket for just such emergencies as this, and was casting about him for a willow from which he might cut a sizable pole, when off to the northwest, along the line of the river woods, he heard a single sharp bark.

“After all,” he said to himself, “I can’t lose anything. I’ll take a chance it’s my fox.”

CHAPTER V

A MIDNIGHT VISITOR

That was the beginning of a long, hard grind through tangled swamps and matted underbrush, for there was none of the pine timber this close to the river. Once Don was half minded to strike out for the more open country farther inland, but always there was a clearing just ahead to tempt him on. The day was growing unseasonably hot, and sweat began to streak across his forehead and down his steaming cheeks.

But on and on he struggled, his only guide the river. At last he had to admit that he had long since passed the spot whence the bark must have sounded, but no sign of fox or any other animal larger than a cottontail. He paused finally, to rest and listen. Not a sound, save the harsh note of a Canada jay. He was so out of patience that he was half minded to take a shot at its flaunting topknot as it twitched saucily from limb to limb.

“Gee but I’m hungry!” he exclaimed as he

dropped wearily on a knoll of mossy turf. "If I had an extra pair of shoes I think I'd eat 'em. A lot of good it did me to lift that salt. It wouldn't do for me to get a shot at that fox now. I expect I'd eat him, fur and all. Guess I'd better take a look in the cupboard."

It was a rather watery cupboard whose lockers he speedily began to investigate. The St. Louis gurgled busily along a few rods away, here being narrowed by steep, rocky banks. Hills were all about him, most of them strewn with giant boulders. One ran right down to the water's edge and about its base eddied a quiet, foam-flecked pool of back water.

"Trout," said Don to himself, and having cut a ten-foot pole from a young larch, he began prospecting about for suitable bait. Not a bug whizzed through the air or droned in sun or shadow. Not a frog went ker-chunk as he walked stealthily alongshore. In disgust he finally pried up a rotted log and poked around under it for a fat white grub. One sleepy looking, wrinkled specimen was all that rewarded his search, and it he almost lost in the water. But at last—kerplunk—it sailed far out into the swirl that rounded the point.

The grub must have fallen right on the nose of Mr. Trout, for the line straightened out with a jerk. So surprised was Don that he lost all his cunning with the rod, and up came his pole with a swish — and with it a dangling ten feet of line. Fish — bait — hook — line — sinker — gone!

Don searched his pockets in vain. Not another hook. He was really hungry by now, but there was nothing to do unless he could stir up something with his rifle. But a glance at the sky put even that thought to flight. A storm was brewing, and by the looks of the clouds it would not be long under way. It behooved him to hunt shelter.

Fortunately, that was not hard to find; around on the landward side of the very hill where he had been fishing he found a round cavelike opening that ran back a good ten feet, at least half of it being roofed against the elements. The floor slanted upward, so it made the best sort of refuge against the rain. He hastily gathered a great load of firewood and piled it into the farthest corner of his cave, and then set about waiting for the deluge.

A big drop of rain hit him on the nose.

Another, and then the very gates were opened. It rained as it rains sometimes in spring. Mutterings of thunder grew louder and louder and each crash seemed to dislodge more and more drops. The noise almost deafened him, but he consoled himself with the thought that no such downpour as that could last long. He proved himself a poor weather prophet, for the flood merely steadied down into a monotonous, wind-driven drizzle. Dusk fell early, on a hungry, dispirited boy crouched back behind a handful of sad-looking coals.

By nine o'clock or so the rain had ceased, but Don looked out upon a sodden world and decided that he could find no more comfortable place than this to spend the night, and he had become resigned to the thought of going to bed supperless. It was not cold, and the tiny fire had kept the damp out of his cave. He stretched himself out on the hard dirt floor of his hole and promptly forgot all his discomforts.

It must have been long after midnight when he awoke. At first he thought it was only the empty pain in his stomach that had broken his rest, but presently he realized that there had been some other disturbing factor. The night

was dark, with not even a star showing through the clouds. About him was the vast silence of the forest. But not for long. Out of that inky, oozy depth sounded a stealthy, hesitating pad-pad-pad that drew nearer and nearer.

Don half rose and peered fearfully through the cave opening. Two fiery points of light seemed to spring out of the dark to meet him. He groped for his rifle, a sickening remembrance upon him that he had carelessly dropped it in the opposite corner. At his first start, the two gleaming eyeballs shifted, ever so slightly, and then, echoing fearsomely in the narrow walls of the cave, an animal cry rang out that sent Don, startled out of his wits, plunging through the dark for his gun. It had begun in a low growl, that cry, but it blared and bellowed at the end.

Don gave a yell himself, of pure fright, and, halfway to his rifle, he yelled again. A furry form had hurled itself upon him. Wet paws raked his face and he felt a hot, damp breath against his throat. And then Don Blackburn burst out laughing.

"It's a dog!" he said aloud, ashamed of his recent scare. "Get your muddy paws out of my face, you playful brute — down, sir, down!"

Don could hear a wet lashing about that told him his demonstrative visitor was wagging his tail. He reached down and patted the shaggy head. "Nice old fellow," he said as a moist tongue met his hand. "But you sure gave me the scare of my young life. Who are you, anyway?"

He coaxed his camp fire into a smoldering blaze, and piled splintered bits of wood on it till it flamed up brightly. In the ruddy light he had a good view of his midnight caller.

Husk!

"And I was so sure I had covered my trail!"

The dog snuggled over close beside the boy and the fire, and soon the three, boy, dog and fire, had drawn the curtains of the night close about them and were lost to the world. A sleepy boy chuckled to himself as he rolled over against his rough-coated friend:

"Kind of lucky for both of us, Husk, old boy, that I was a poor woodsman to-night. If I'd had that rifle close to hand——"

Don awoke with a dampish feeling that all the world ought to be a heavy gray. He found that his fire had been drowned and that he had been sleeping in a half inch of water. But when he

had crawled stiffly out of his hole he discovered that the sun was out and was speedily steaming up the last of the rain puddles.

He was fearfully aware of an inner emptiness, but even at that his spirits were high as Husk came bounding out behind him and started a joyous barking at a flock of sparrows in a near-by bush. "Good boy," cried Don, just as joyously. "Let's see if we can't scare up a little provender."

He thought ruefully of the good silk fishline his awkwardness had cost him the night before, as he walked down to the river to wash his face and hands. He had expected that the water would be pretty well muddied, but apparently the storm had been only a local one and the sun-touched water rippled past in pale-blue cleanliness. Now if he only had a fishline ——

But Don had not forgotten all the tricks of his carefree boyhood. Many a shiner or sunfish had he caught on bent pin and twisted silk thread line — both from his mother's workbasket. His coat lapel furnished an extra strong pin, and there was the scant length of line still tangled about his pole. A crooked stick soon provided him with a wriggling worm, which he draped

artistically about the handmade hook, and forthwith he set about finding a brushy spot where it might be hoped a fat pumpkinseed lurked.

His judgment was good. Just off the outer edge of a water-soaked log he dropped his baited hook, waiting patiently for the nibble that came in a very few minutes. His jerk was a bit premature, but not so the second time. A diminutive perch flew far up on the bank, to be pounced upon by Husk, who, the instant he realized the flopping thing in the grass was not a game but a breakfast, gave one gulp and looked up expectantly at Don for more.

“See here, pal,” urged the boy; “you come on down beside me. This business of eating your breakfast raw kind of leaves me out. So you can just——” but a vigorous jerk cut short the sage advice. A second later a fat sunfish was yanked up over the log. It fell off in mid-flight, but dropped luckily into a little rock-bound basin, where Don pounced upon it before it could flip its way back to open water and freedom.

At varying intervals Don hooked four more, of various sizes. While waiting for the next bite he built himself a quick fire and then set about dressing his catch. He did not bother with scaling the

fish, but merely opened them down the gullet and put a generous amount of salt inside. About each he plastered a thick coating of mud, dropping the brown lumps into the center of the fire. Then he went back to his fishing but luck seemed to have deserted him.

However, when, in the course of fifteen minutes the "fish-bricks" had baked to a rusty red and the clay had cracked open, he pulled them from the fire and carefully pried loose the hard casings. Scales, skins and fins came along, leaving the white meat. It was a delicate morsel, and Don, breaking his long fast, did full justice. Husk had his share too, although he seemed to find the heads and tails just as savoury as the choicer portions that Don fed to him from his fingers.

The last bite disappeared. Don licked his fingers and Husk his chops, and then the boy picked up his rifle and sauntered away from the river. "We don't know where we're starting from, Husk, old top, and we haven't any known destination, but let's be on our merry way at any rate."

But Husk soon showed that he at least had a definite aim in life, for hardly had they broken

away from the timber of the river bottoms before, tail in air and nose to the ground, he gave a low whine of excitement and set off at a furious pace, waiting impatiently at long intervals for the distanced boy to catch up. His manner seemed to say: "Can't you see I'm in a hurry—I've got important business to attend to."

Then he would be off again. For the life of him Don could not see the slightest trace or trail, and yet the scent must be fresh, for the rain had washed away all prior records. The boy was fast getting winded but he followed good-humoredly. He noted that they seemed to be retracing the ground he had covered the afternoon before, and once he had a vague notion that Husk was merely following his own trail back to his master.

Just about the time this mistrust was becoming an alarming certainty, the dog veered off to the west. They had turned the tiny lake long since, and now Don saw they were almost upon the brook where he had last seen trace of the black fox. For a wild instant the thought flashed through his mind: Husk had scented the fox!

But that notion did not last long. The dog reached the brookside, gave an impatient sniff or two up and down the bank, lapped up a tongue-

full of water, and then darted back into the marsh grass, yelping disgustedly when he saw the boy had paused beside the brook. Finally, seeing that his new master could not be roused to further fruitless chase, the shaggy fellow came back and squatted close against the boy's legs as he stood peering up and down the edge of firm sand.

With a shrug of amusement for his credulity, Don walked slowly along the sand for a few hundred yards, his eyes keen for a footprint that the rain had not blotted out. Husk went nosing along a few paces ahead. Of a sudden he raised his head in a long howl of discovery—the bristles on his neck rose—without a backward glance at his master he was off like the wind. Through the tall, saw-edged grass he plowed madly and soon was lost to sight.

Don was almost inclined to feel put out, but as he stooped over the spot where Husk had first given chase, the boy straightened up with a low whistle of excited conjecture. There in the sand was the print of a paw—just such a one as he had seen once before in the soft ooze of the marsh. Don needed no further proof—it was the black fox. At top speed he was off in the wake of Husk.

The chase was one that taxed the last ounce of Don Blackburn's endurance, for the grass was waist-high in places, and it cut wherever it touched the skin. Moreover, Husk had long since been lost to sight, and the boy's only guide was the dog's yelps as he lost and regained the scent — and these sounded fainter and fainter. At last all was still. Don trudged on, conscious now of the fact that his throat was parched and his too-well-salted fish were calling for water to swim in.

He dog-trotted on in this fashion for well over a mile, wondering what had become of his four-footed friend, when a sudden turn brought him bang up against a sight that set his pulses bounding.

Just ahead was a clump of great boulders, the mound perhaps fifty feet high, moss-grown, and with a stunted pine at the very summit. Two of the big rocks leaned against each other at the top but leaving a gradually widening crevice that at the bottom had spread to respectable cave size. Before the opening stood Husk, nose and tail in a straight line with each other, like a blooded pointer. Not a muscle quivered, and though he must have heard Don's approach, not a backward glance.

“*Good boy!*” said Don softly, bringing his gun up under his arm and throwing a cartridge into place. “Go in and bring him out, Husk. Fetch ’em!”

Husk pricked up his ears. Lifting his feet like a thoroughbred, he started forward. Don’s nerves were on edge but his muscles were as steady as steel. He was alert—ready. The first flash of dark fur and there would be a puff of smoke, an echoing report, and Don had no doubt what would have happened.

A half second passed. Zz-p-p! a streak of gray fur bounded through the cave entrance—*crack!* The bunch of fur performed queer gyrations on the ground a half dozen feet from the cave. Husk burst madly from the dark hole and caught the jouncing object in flashing teeth and gave it a toss in the air, then brought it triumphantly to where the boy stood, looking whimsically, first at his rifle and then at the dog and his prey.

“Husk—you old fraud! A cottontail.”

CHAPTER VI

HUSK CLEARS HIS RECORD

And then Don sat him down on a mossy knoll and laughed till the tears came. Husk, after standing dejectedly, his tail between his legs, came over and put a protesting paw on the boy's knee. "All right, old fellow, I won't laugh any more, but don't you expect me to follow *your* nose any more."

Then he sprang to his feet. "But we'd better be on our way — whichever way that is. Willing to chase along with me, are you? Left your old master for good, have you? Heh?"

Husk barked happily.

"Good! Let's go back to the brook and see if it looks drinkable. That chase you led me made me hanker for liquid refreshment."

He led the way through the tall grass, but their trip back was marked by many stops. The water in the brook proved to be as cold as it was clear, and the boy and dog bent over and drank their fill. Some whim led Don to follow

along the sandy margin, partly because the walking was much easier, and they had to go somewhere; but mostly — though he would not admit it even to himself — because he hoped to pick up the trail of the fox again. Somehow, he could not give up the chase.

When Husk had come, he had had a great glimmer of hope. If Husk could follow a scent he might still be able to overtake the fugitive. Capturing the fox had come to mean something big and eminently worth while to him: it was the price and prize of his belief in himself. It was to be his ransom from the bad opinions of those he had left behind in *Lae du Chien*.

But Husk's nose had proved a failure, and so Don's last dream of success went glimmering.

Still —

As he walked along he kept eyes to the narrow strip of sand. Husk soon caught the spirit of the game, and plunged madly back and forth, sniffing and snorting, barking sharply at every unexpected sight in the grassy border or in the water.

Suddenly Don, who had stooped over to admire a school of shining minnows darting through a rocky shoal, noticed a subtle change in Husk's

manner. A low growl replaced the playful bark. The dog's head drew back onto his shoulders and seemed to have doubled in size. As Don came running up Husk uttered a low whine of eager coaxing and would have darted off had not the boy seized him by the scruff of the neck.

Don bent over curiously, as eager as the dog. A low whistle came through his pursed lips, and his eyes faintly shone. "I'll take it all back, Husk — all I said about your nose. Those three paw marks may be only a timber wolf or a common ordinary scrub of a country fox, but until I *know* different I'm going to believe it's our black fox. Lead the way, you old hero. I'll be right on your heels."

Husk needed no second permission. With a businesslike bark he settled to his task. Those three footprints were the only visible trace the fox or whatever it was had left. But Husk did not hesitate an instant; into the coarse swamp grass he plunged, plowing his way over and through at a great rate. Don, following as best he could, tripped himself a half dozen times in the quarter mile stretch of half-swamp they traversed. Then, to his great relief, Husk led the way to higher, more open ground. Into a

sparse timber of jack pines, rising from a waste of fine sand, Husk sniffed his way. Here for a moment the dog appeared baffled, allowing Don to catch up.

Finally it was Don's sharp eye that caught sight of the trail that swung across a corner of the tract and broke into a marshy plain. "More hard going," growled the boy. "He's some foxy fox — but we'll nose him out, eh, Husky?"

Husk promptly proceeded to carry out that plan, but the scent was as difficult as the going, for it led along shallow brooks and through them, along the watery marges of tiny ponds, across oozy swamps where to stop meant to be engulfed. Steadily they were bearing toward the west, just a few hundred yards from the course of the river.

When Don noticed this fact he began to pluck up heart again; the course of the trail was bearing out his theory: That the fox would follow the river till he could cross — and continue his going into the north country.

The day was growing older. The sun stood straight over their heads, began to slip down toward the rim of the trees, and now was just dividing its disc on a tall pine. Don began to realize that he was fearfully tired — and hungry.

“ Next time you lose the trail, Husk, we’ll stop and eat — if we can find anything.”

It seemed as if the dog had understood, for in less than three minutes he began coursing about in aimless circles, stopping once to scratch himself behind one ear and look up inquiringly at Don.

“ All right, old pal. This is as good a spot as any to camp to-night. We won’t find his foxiness before dark anyway. What would you like for supper? ”

“ Wuh! ” said Husk.

“ Rare — or well done? ” laughed Don.

“ Wuh — wuh-wuh! ” answered Husk.

“ Fine! ” cried the boy. “ I can see that you and I are going to be great friends — but either you’ll have to learn my language or I yours. What did you do with your old master? ”

Husk industriously scratched himself behind one ear, closing one eye in the operation, in a wink that made his face look almost human in its intelligence.

“ Huh,” laughed Don. “ You don’t need to tell *me*. You gave him the sack — and small blame to you. No self-respectin’ dog could pal up with a man who hadn’t looked water in the

face in a month. But that's not getting us anything to eat — and it'll be dark before we know it. Just take your mind off that fox —— ” for Husk was beginning to sniff about once more —— “ and tell me what we can rustle and where we can rustle it.”

But Husk refused to commit himself on that score, though his eager eyes and still more eager tail told that he would gladly do anything.

Now the month was September, and near where they rested the slope of the river valley began, a dense green thicket of trees of all sorts showing the winding course of the St. Louis. A vague remembrance of vine-matted trees gave Don an idea. He sprang up and began an investigation that found a luscious end where a huge wild grape vine canopied a wide-spreading maple. The grapes were at their best — tart but sweet. Don ate with relish, though at last his lips and tongue began to burn and his throat to demand water. Husk watched the boy gorge himself, with ill-concealed disgust. His eye followed each despoiled bunch as Don threw it away. He even walked over and sniffed hopefully at the first few, but returned and squatted on his haunches in a sort of unhoping expectancy.

Satisfied, at last, Don clambered down the twisted arm-thick vine, and patted the dog apologetically on the pleading snout. "Don't like grapes, do you? Well, come on and we'll see if we can find something a bit more to your liking."

Husk bounded off, disappearing from sight. A furious barking ensued shortly, and after an interval Husk returned, licking his chops—he had solved his own problem in his own way.

"Good enough!" praised Don. "Now all we need is an armful of balsam boughs for a bed and a supply of firewood—what's in you!" sharply, for the dog had laid back his ears and bared his teeth in an unmistakable snarl. Almost it looked as if he were about to attack the companion of his day's hike, and Don leaped aside in no little alarm.

Then Husk's neck-hair bristled forward in a great ruff, his head seemed to swell and draw back onto his heavy shoulders; a most unearthly sound, half howl, half bark, seemed to leap from his throat.

"Gee——" began Don, half frightened, for the dark shadows of the woods were scary, and the lonely hills sent back the howl in weird

echoes. Then he paused abruptly; his eyes followed the direction of Husk's glare.

The last rays of the sun made a blood-red background for a craggy hill perhaps a scant half mile away. Its treeless slope stood out bare and gaunt against the brilliant light. A tiny black speck showed at the very summit, a speck that stretched a back-tilted throat into the gorgeous coloring of the sky. A single short bark, sharp even in the distance, defiant — pathetic.

"My fox!" gasped Don.

"R-r-r-ow-oo-ow!" keened Husk, and the echoes came back in startling distinctness, a sort of menace in their throaty syllables. Involuntarily Don shivered, and the dog, sensing something that was beyond his understanding, sidled against his leg and raised questioning eyes toward the boy. Silent they stood, and the forest shadows seemed creeping in upon them. The last echo died. The blood-red beyond the hill faded to orange, to saffron, to pink, and the softest gray. And then a star shone out. And then, once more, like a challenge, came the short, sharp cry from the hilltop.

"Yip!"

Don looked down at his dumb companion.

“ Old sport,” he said, whimsically, “ if you want to know what kind of a noise a thousand dollars makes, there it is! ”

Then he stooped and very carefully dug a line with his boot-heel in the soft turf. At one end he scratched two lines to make the head of an arrow — and the arrow’s flight carried over the lonely hill on which a lonely fox had barked — at the setting sun, perhaps; at a pursuing boy and a mongrel dog, Don felt in his heart.

“ Too many grapes,” muttered Don to himself as, some hours later, he awakened from the heavy sleep into which he had fallen almost the instant his head hit the fragrant balsam. A particularly vivid dream had disturbed his slumbers, and the instant of awakening left him with a vague thankfulness that he had not been allowed to finish the dream — a grizzly had been just about to make a meal of him. Almost the big bear’s growl echoed in his ears as he rubbed his eyes and looked over to see how his fire was doing.

And then he saw that his dream had been at least half reality, for there stood Husk beside him, his paw raised as if he had just been clawing at his sleeping master. As Don looked into

his bright eyes the dog gave an eager whine and dashed madly off into the gloom. Don sat up in bewilderment. Husk came tearing back and seized the boy's coatsleeve in his jaw, as if to help the boy to rise. His manner seemed to say: "Wake up, old boy — big things are afoot!"

Yet he did not bark or make any noise save that first low pleading whine.

But Don's faith in the dog had been restored. He leaped to his feet and only pausing to catch up his rifle was off at the heels of the excited dog.

Through the tangled brush of a scrub pine belt they plunged and out onto a heavy-grassed prairie that stretched unbroken for miles. Away over at the other side of the world, it seemed to Don, he could see the stars winking in an inky-blue sky. A faint glow of reddish light caught his eye; it was perhaps two miles in, and was the sort of shine that would come from a camp fire that had died to embers.

Don halted, seized by a sudden thought: Husk had discovered the camp of his former master and wanted to lead the boy back. "Nothing doing, old scout!" he said grimly, turning on his heel and starting back toward the spot where a faint gleam through the woods located his own

camp fire. "If you're going back to *him*, you'll go it alone. I'll take no chances of losing the trail of old Blackie."

He had not gone over a dozen steps when he halted again, amazed at the insistence of Husk, who darted ahead of him and barred his path. Almost the dog's eyes spoke as he looked up at the hesitating boy. Then —

"Lead the way, Husk. I'm game."

A sudden thought came to him. While Husk was evidently leading him toward that distinct camp fire, the dog could not possibly see it, for the prairie grasses lay in waves and billows, and Husk's nose barely reached up to the free air. Puzzled, but determined to see the adventure through, Don followed close behind the impatient dog.

It soon became evident to Don that the dog was following a scent through the fragrant grasses. That the trail was new was evident from the ease with which he sniffed his way along. Even in the dim light Don had no trouble himself in noting traces every few rods of the passage of some creature whose bulk had bent the grass. At one such spot he stopped and carefully parted the stems, hoping that some footprint would give a

clew to the identity of the one they were trailing. With his fingertips he felt about. The damp of fresh-turned earth met his groping fingers. With a whistle of astonishment he straightened up.

“ A boot-heel! ” he exclaimed. “ Clean-cut — it was never made by your former master, Husk. But at that we’d best go easy. Not a sound, now! ”

Husk seemed to understand, for he plunged ahead once more. Don strained his eyes ahead, trying to locate the camp fire, but it had winked out and only the prairie night lay before him. Suddenly Husk gave a low yip of excitement. An instant later Don knew what had caused it. Faintly, blown along the damp, fragrant breeze, came a cry. He was not sure it was human, but something told him it was a call for help.

But he did not relax his caution. The cry, if cry it was, came from a distance — a half mile at least. At an easy trot he and the dog sped across the prairie. Suddenly, as they rounded the top of a little knoll, the fire glared out once more. It was barely two hundred yards away, somewhat out of line with the quarter from which the call had come. Don was undecided whether to trust his ears or his eyes, but Husk made

straight for the fire. So the boy followed close behind.

As he had expected, the pale gleam of the coals showed no trace of human occupancy save a great pile of balsam boughs and against a low bush a dark object that turned out to be a canvas coat. Don looked about in no little bewilderment. After a little indecision he ventured a low call, but there came no answer. He raised his voice then in a ringing shout that seemed to pierce the darkness. He strained his ears as he waited for the reply he confidently expected. None came.

Husk, excited beyond further control, rent the night with a wild medley of yelps and barks. Through the midst of his wild clamor broke a sound that Don had difficulty in recognizing, so unexpected was it. Discordant, ear-splitting, it burst from close beside the camp—the bray of a mule!

A mule—out here in the wilderness.

In his astonishment Don stood a moment motionless. Then out of the stillness that succeeded the double outburst of animal noise, came the sound that Don's sharpened senses had been waiting for.

From the ring of darkness came a groan, scarcely audible.

"Easy now, Husk," counseled the boy.
"Come on."

They didn't go far. A ponderous bulk plunged past them in the gloom — the mule in flight. A crash that ended in a terrific thump almost scared Don out of his wits. Then once more a wild crashing about, and full tilt an ungainly steed, hoofs wildly flying, ears flopping madly, rushed past them. So near did it come in its wild career that Don had much ado to fall out of the way. A sudden realization came to him.

"Tied!"

He heard the big animal scrambling through the brush and then once more approach. His circle was wider this time. "Unwinding himself," surmised Don. "When he gets wound up I'll get him."

But the plan did not have a chance to mature. The mule's circuit ceased abruptly as he came up to where the boy had fallen back out of range. Quick as a flash the unwieldy hulk wheeled. Don felt as if his face had been seared by a red-hot steel, as past his barely averted head two wicked heels fairly zipped.

Husk made a dart as if to close in on the plunging, snorting jack, but Don caught him by the collar just in time.

Then he made a startling discovery.

Through the darkness he could just make out the bending trunk of the sapling to which the animal was tethered. But it was not that which made Don gasp in dismay, for the tree seemed stout enough. Midway between tree and mule lay sprawled a dark object. Horrified beyond measure, Don at once recognized it as the figure of a human being.

The attitude of the sprawled figure was grotesque—it was as if some rude scarecrow had been torn from its cornfield perch by a playful cyclone and flung a few miles through space. At first Don thought that the inanimate figure had been kicked to death or trampled by the infuriated mule, but his horror was increased when a sudden tugging of the mule on his leash thumped the body heavily about, and Don realized that the person who lay there within the deadly ground circled by those flying heels, was tangled up in the rope that tethered the mule to the tree.

Tangled up in the rope, he had been dragged about in the irresistible rushes of the frightened

beast, until unconsciousness — perhaps death — had come.

Don was in a quandary. What could he do — supposing there still was life in that helpless, hapless figure? He dared go no nearer the tree; the vicious kicks and plunges of the animal could not be evaded. He could not hope to reach the rope to cut it. And if he tried shooting the mule — well, his thirty-thirty carried too small a ball to stop that great hulk in one shot. And the infuriated plunges of the wounded animal would be doubly dangerous to the helpless victim.

He thought over a dozen schemes and abandoned them all as too hazardous, coming back finally to his first thought: He must manage to cut the rope.

But how?

In his belt was his sheath knife, which he now drew. As he felt its keen edge a daring plan popped into his mind. Crouching low, he made ready to try it out at the first favorable moment. Pulling up a great handful of grass, roots and all, he gave a wild yell and let it fly at the flank of the unsuspecting mule. A wild squeal shrilled forth, and the terrorized animal started on another of its mad rounds. The minute it passed

him, Don darted in, straight for the tree. He had almost laid the knife against the rope when through his mind flashed a picture of a maddened mule plunging through brush and over prairie, dragging at the end of a torturesome rope a mangled, helpless body. He sickened with horror.

But it was no time for weakness. The mule had made the circuit—the boy had to move quickly to keep from being wound tight to the tree. Eight or ten feet out was the huddled mass that represented a human life—perhaps. Beyond that was a menacing pair of heels and a crushing, crashing bulk.

Just then Husk entered the action. With a low snarl he lunged for the throat of the plunging mule. The infuriated animal shook him off easily, but in that instant Don acted.

A defiant yell on his lips, he leaped the two strides to where the body lay. A single slash of his knife severed the rope. A whoop that would have done credit to a whole tribe of Indians shrilled out into the night.

A weird snort—and the clatter of terror-stricken hoofs. Into the low brush to the south plunged a suddenly released mule.

Don heard the thunder of his wild gallop die

away into the distance. Then he turned to the task at hand.

“Now for the corpse,” he said aloud with grim humor that barely hid a shudder.

“You’ll find him a pretty lively corpse,” answered a faint voice.

CHAPTER VII

TWO FROM MISSOURI

That was the last word heard from the injured one for over an hour, for he had fainted dead away while Don was dragging him close beside the fire. As the new wood Don piled on caught fire, and the flames went leaping up, the fitful play of the ruddy light showed him a boy of about his own age. Don found water in a camp kettle, and with it he bathed the lad's face, deep crusted with mud and blood. Deep scratches scored his cheeks and forehead, and one eye showed a purple-black outline even in the uncertain light.

Don was not sure it was the wisest thing to do, but he decided to try first to bring the boy to, and then make an examination for more serious injuries than were evident in the general bruised condition of the visible parts of the body. It proved a long, hard task, and more than once Don stopped his cold-water treatment to make sure that the pulse was still fluttering in the discolored wrist.

But at last a deep, convulsive breath told of returning consciousness, and shortly thereafter the patient sat up abruptly and said as if nothing had happened:

“ Might have known I couldn’t make it before dark.”

Don thought the boy was rambling, delirious, so he answered soothingly: “ You’re all right, now. Just lie back and take it easy.”

“ Yes, I’ll take it easy if I ever get hold of that mule. I’ve just about made up my mind to skin him alive! ”

“ Well, he just about skinned you, all right,” laughed Don, relieved to find that he did not have a raving, crippled mule-victim to deal with. “ I expect you’d better feel yourself all over—or let me do it—to see whether you’re hurt inside or not.”

“ Feel myself? Say, don’t you think I can feel myself without gouging around in my ribs. I can feel every muscle and bone in my anatomy—each one’s got a different kind of ache. My brain’s been jolted around till it’s jelly—or butter. I haven’t even got enough sense left to ask you how you happened to come, and to thank you for having come.”

“ You don’t need to thank *me* for that — thank old Husk here.”

At the mention of his name the dog came close, wagging the whole hind part of his body. The injured boy put out a weak hand, and the dog licked it. “ Guess he must have heard me yowling for help; I let out some powerful yelps at first. Something had scared the darn mule—I was about half asleep and I didn’t pay much attention to what I was doing. He had got his rope all tangled up in a little bush. I finally got the snarls out, but I was standing right in the midst of the tangle when the fool mule decided to bolt. There was a double hitch around my leg before I knew what had happened — and then the merry-go-round began. He ground me up against the tree about a dozen times, and ground himself right on top of me, and then he’d grind me out again—like coming out of a sausage machine it felt. If it hadn’t been for you — and Husk here—it sure would have been all night with me.”

“ I don’t know whether you’ll ever see your jack again —— ”

“ Small loss. He’s the orneriest mule in seven states anyway. Dad paid five dollars for him to

a man who'd been trying for two years to *give* him away. Say," boyishly, "my name's Bud Ellis."

"I'm ——" Don hesitated an instant and then decided to tell the truth. "I'm Don Blackburn," he blurted; "I'm running away from home — by request," he added bitterly.

"Not from your folks?" exclaimed the other incredulously.

"Oh, yes," Don answered, somewhat thickly, for something in the other boy's tone made him feel suddenly deserted and alone in the world. "They said — father did — that I wasn't worth my salt, so now, unless I can earn it I don't get it. I came from Lac du Chien ——"

"Why, that's on the other side the line, isn't it?"

"Line? What line?"

"The Canada line."

"No — the Lac's in Wisconsin."

"Sure — that's what I said. This is Canada — or didn't you know?"

"Canada? And are you a Canuck?"

"Nothing stirring on that! I'm a sure enough Yankee. Dad came from Vermont, and my mother was born in Indiana, but I originated

in Missouri — along with that pesky mule. Dad calls the brute Jud — Jud and Bud, the ‘ Show-me ’ twins.”

“ Canada! ” exclaimed Don, still unbelievably. Then he laughed: “ I wondered why it was I felt so queer last night. But are you all alone up here in the woods? ”

“ Far from it. Our camp’s about ten miles on up the river. Dad’s got a crowd of his city friends shooting up a big timber tract he owns up this way, and he took me along as a prize for passing off a near-flunk I made in Latin last year. Jud and I came into town for supplies — that is, we came in to order them. A team brings ’em out. We were on the way back. I stopped for a swim in the river back there somewheres, and forgot the time. I kind of got lost, too. So I had to lay by till morning. Where are you bound for? ”

“ I — well, I —— ” Don hesitated. Then something in the interested honest eyes of his new-found friend — and his own longing for sympathy perhaps — decided him to tell his story.

“ Gee! ” said Bud, when Don had finished. “ Gee, you sure have got some nerve! The fox might lead you clean to the North Pole! ”

“ I’d follow him there,” answered Don determinedly, “ and pull him down by the tail! ”

“ Huh! ” snorted Bud. “ You’ve got some job ahead of you if I know anything about foxes. You’ll earn your thousand dollars — and then some. Better chase along with me to camp and get some breakfast. What have you got in the way of supplies? ”

Don reached over and patted his rifle.

“ That and a bag of salt,” adding with grim humor: “ I’m saving part of that to use on his foxiness’s hide.”

“ Well, you better drift along with me. You let dad tell you what he knows about the game. He’s been away up in the Barrens. He knows the Hudson’s Bay country all the way to the ice cap. He’s hunted everything, from English sparrows to Kadiak bear. What he don’t know about game trails has been torn out of the book.”

“ But how’ll I get *you* there? You’re all bunged up. I couldn’t lug you ten miles — you said ten, didn’t you? And I guess your twin hasn’t stopped yet.”

“ He’ll head straight for camp. By morning the whole hunting party — there’s four besides

dad, and two guides — will be scouring the country for me. I'll be stiff as a board by morning anyway, so if you'll just chuck an armful of that wood on the fire, I'm going to try to sleep. I feel somewhat weak in the head."

As Don piled the fuel on and the fire flared up, he could see that the boy did look pale — where the bruises would let the color show through. He was a sorry looking specimen. His face looked as if it had been flayed, and his hands, especially the backs, were raw and oozing slow blood through the roughened skin.

"Huh," grunted Don, "not much of a doctor, me. But I'll put some rags around those paws and that goose egg on your forehead if you've got anything that will do for bandages."

"Let her bleed," mumbled Bud sleepily. "The rags'd stick like Billy-blue-blazes. Those bumps are nothing, anyway, to the thumps and wallops I've got where they don't show. All I ask is — let me sleep. Over here, Husk, old scout, and let me pat you on the head before I get so sore'd up I can't move."

Husk came over and suffered himself to be patted on the head. He even licked Bud's hand, but he returned at once to Don's side.

"Had him long?" asked Bud.

"Day."

"Some dog," remarked Bud simply.

After that he slept. Don kept awake, wetting a cloth from time to time and laying it on the bruises. Each time Bud objected strenuously to being aroused from his sleep by the cold touch, but Don persisted until the faint streaks of dawn crept up in the east. Then, finding that less than a quarter of a mile away a craggy looking hill jutted high above the prairie, he and Husk set out to watch for the expected rescue party.

Bud watched them leave — tried, in fact, to follow, but had to fall back with a groan. "Every bone in my body feels as if I had the toothache all over me."

Dog and boy scaled the boulder-strewn slope. As far as the eye could reach the prairie stretched, and look as they might, they could see no sign of any moving object in the direction Bud had said the camp lay. Don was about to charge pellmell down the hill again, when, just beyond the camp fire a dark, moving outline caught his eye. He looked more closely, then gave a yell that even reached Bud.

When Don reached camp again, after a hare-

brained chase through the rocks and across the tufted prairie, he had just enough breath left to shout:

“ Your fellow Missourian is just the other side those bushes.”

“ Here — where you going? ” cried Bud as Don would have hurried by.

“ To catch the critter — if I can.”

“ Huh — small chance *you’d* have. Give me that bucket there.”

Don obeyed, but stared wonderingly.

“ A good-sized stick,” demanded Bud briskly.

“ What in thunder — ” but he gave Bud the desired club.

Bud turned the bucket bottom up and at once began a lively tattoo on it with the club. For all the world it looked as if the boy had gone crazy. But in an instant it was apparent that there was method in his madness. The mule came galloping through the bushes, his long neck stretched far out, his big ears flapping.

“ That was the feeding time signal at the camp. Jud was always the first one there. There’s a handful of oats in that sack. Just show him the sack — he’ll know what you mean. Then you tie him up while he’s happy.”

But the mule seemed to have forgotten his fright. He submitted tamely to being tied to a tree. He made short work of the oats and stamped impatiently about for more but was tractable enough.

"Guess it was the dark that scared him last night—and me scrambling about there on the ground trying to get loose. If I could get up on his back I might be able to ride back to camp—if you tie me on. I'd rather take a licking than move an inch, but the doctor says take your medicine, so here goes."

With the help of Don—and many grunts and groans—he managed to totter the few steps to where Jud now stood, his ears drooping at the same angle as his tufted tail. He made a few skittish sidesteps, but when Bud spoke to him he stood quietly enough while the two boys considered ways and means of mounting him.

"Tell you what," suggested Don. "Why couldn't we ride double?"

"Mostly because Jud won't carry double."

"Pooh! He's big enough to carry a regiment. I'll h'ist you up, and then tie him loose. Then I'll see if I can get up in front of you so you'll have something to hang onto. Up you go."

Bud gave a wild yell of pain that set Jud's flanks trembling, but for a wonder he stood firm. Handing Bud his rifle, Don untied the rope and managed to fasten the loose end to the ring on the other side the halter, so that he had a rude pair of reins. "Sit tight," he warned his friend; "I'm coming up."

So was Jud.

He gave two or three frantic jumps that almost unseated the two. Husk began a frantic barking that added the final touch to the mule's demoralization. Across the prairie he thundered, Husk snapping at his heels, Don sawing at the rope halter. He might as well have been yanking at the Atlantic cable for all the impression he made.

Somehow they managed to stick on. Whenever the mule's energy seemed about to flag, or his fright to be losing its effect, Husk, from the rear, nipped up his lagging footsteps. Mile after mile they covered — a dozen at least it seemed to Don before in a weak voice the boy behind said:

"Just behind the big clump of spruce back from the river — that's the camp."

Jud seemed to know it too, for his gait became steadier without losing any of its haste. Indeed, it looked as if he meant to plunge right through

the timber. Just as Don's dismay had changed to frank fear, the big beast wheeled and skirted the edge of the scrub pine that bordered the heavier spruce, and went lumbering along until, as if he had hit a stone wall, he stopped dead at the doorway of a mud-plastered log cabin.

Don almost went over Jud's lowered head, but managed to hold his seat. Not so Bud. Don heard a dull thud, and looked around, to see that his friend had fallen, almost under the mule's heels. Don slipped to the ground in a panic, crowding between the prostrate boy and the mule. He was just in time. Missouri Jud lunged. Don thumped him soundly just ahead of his hind leg. The mule snorted, whirled, and before Don could duck, caught the boy with a vicious kick that knocked him across the body of the other boy.

A blind rage went through Don's brain, as, sick with the pain in his shoulder, where the kick had landed, he rose tottering to his feet. His rifle had fallen within reach. He caught it up and jerked a cartridge into place. The stock seemed to leap up against his arm; his finger trembled on the trigger. He was seeing red. The mule had turned, his brute lips turned back

from wicked looking teeth, his ears laid flat. Don drew a close bead.

And then he dropped his rifle back under his arm. The tingling left him. He felt a sudden shame for his rage.

"Hello there!" boomed a voice startlingly close, and from a cabin just back of the one where the little drama had taken place, a stocky, mackinaw-clad man came running.

"Came mighty nigh shootin' my mule, didn't you?" he bantered cheerfully. "I saw you sighting him down. Don't you know mule steak is out of season?" Then he saw the limp object between Don's spraddled feet.

"Bud!" he exclaimed, a note of intense alarm in his voice. "Did *he* do that?" But he had not paused as he asked the question. He had picked Bud's unconscious body from the ground and was bearing it toward the cabin from which he had come. "Kicked him, eh?" he fired over his shoulder.

"No—it was me he kicked," mumbled Don, his legs all at once shaky under him.

"You? But Bud——"

"Last night—he got—Bud," answered Don slowly, his voice faint.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FOX HUNT

It was some hours later when Don awoke. There was a curious numbness in his upper arm and shoulder, but no particular pain, so he sat up in the bunk that he soon saw was built onto one side of a tiny room. Across the narrow space was another bunk, and a second glance showed that it too contained a boy, but this one was literally swathed in bandages. A slight stirring told that the other was awake.

“That you — Bud?” called Don softly.

“Me and then some,” came the answer.

“Shut up, you two,” warned a gruff voice from the shadows at the end of the room. “Got orders to keep you quiet till the boss comes back, and I’ll do it if I have to straddle you.”

“Say, Hank,” begged Bud, “tell us what happened.”

“Huh,” grunted Hank. “What happened was a Missouri mule. Thought he was a sausage grinder. Had one of you pretty well pulverized

as it was. We run plumb out o' rags tyin' you up. As fer your pardner, well he only got one kick."

"I'm going to get up," suggested Don hopefully.

"I'll handle you worser'n the mule did if you do," promised Hank good-humoredly. "Gwan back to sleep, both o' you."

There was nothing else to do, so they dozed most of the day away. Along toward night Mr. Ellis came in, and Don was allowed to get out of his bunk and have a bite to eat at the camp table. There he met the other men of the hunting party. There was a Mr. Lewis, a tall, thin, bespectacled man who grinned nervously every time anyone spoke to him. He seemed eternally trying to erase himself from the conversation. Don afterwards learned he was a prominent states attorney.

Mr. Cook was a jolly fat man who had "doctor" written all over him. He it was who had attended their hurts. His hunting partner, Mr. Jordan, was a wiry, gray-haired man who looked less than thirty so far as face went, but who had at least a dozen grandchildren, several of them Don's age or better. Mr. Friend was a dark,

tall, talkative man, Mr. Lewis' hunting partner.

Don shook hands with them all, then took his place at the table. Mr. Ellis, merely a grown-up version of Bud, looked at him keenly through his thick-lensed glasses. "Well, lad, want to tell us the yarn?"

"Not much of a yarn, but I guess I owe you some sort of explanation."

"Not unless you want to give it," interposed Mr. Jordan quickly. Nods seconded his statement.

"Oh, there's nothing I mind telling. I ran away from home a couple of days ago. I was the extra mouth to feed, and I'd never given any sign of being the extra pair of hands that ought to go with it. So at least they thought. They had decided it was time for me to get out and hustle for myself, so I just beat them to it. I thought I saw a chance to show them they were wrong — in a hurry. I guess I've lost my chance, but it's still up to me to make good — or at least to relieve them of the trouble of looking after me."

"Huh!" said Mr. Ellis, then sharply: "Name's Blackburn, eh? Son of Gordon Blackburn? I thought so," as Don nodded. "Just

like your old man. Proud and sensitive; I knew him when he was your age. But I thought your father was well heeled."

"He was — until his partner left him in the lurch. Skipped out with all the cash, he did, and left dad to pay all the bills. It took all he had, and then some. The house will have to be sold unless he can raise a thousand dollars before the first of the year — that's why I'm here."

"How's that?"

Then Don told the story of the black fox. He noticed curious looks passing between Mr. Cook and Mr. Jordan, and wondered what he had said that should make the one so gleeful. When he had finished his account, Mr. Cook burst out:

"Ha-huh! Laugh at me, will you? Call me color blind, spavined, moth-eaten? I said it was a fox I saw, and black, and now you see! We'd had him, too, if you hadn't stopped so long to ask fool questions and poke fun at me. Next time you'll pay attention to a seasoned hunter."

"Seasoned! Salted, smoked and sun-cured. You wouldn't know — "

"What you two squabbling about now?" demanded Mr. Friend wearily. "I thought you had settled that polecat business yesterday."

"It's a fox now," snorted Mr. Jordan. "Fatty here *thinks* he saw a fox that was black as a black cat's tail—those were his very words ——"

"I did see it, I tell you ——"

"Oh, well," agreed Mr. Friend, "let it go at that. You saw a black fox. They're never found south of the Arctic Circle, but just for the sake of your reputation for truth and veracity, one came down here and ——"

"I saw one too," suggested Don slyly. "I really saw it, you know. And he was *brought* down. Maybe he had a piece of the Arctic Circle along as a souvenir. I saw him, in a box, in a country grocery store. And I saw him again, less than ten miles east and south of here —last night."

"Bully for you!" cried Mr. Cook, gratefully. "We'll stick together, my boy. As soon as your shoulder gets well you and I ——" he looked daggers at his former partner of the chase — "you and I will go out and bring in that black pelt if it takes all winter."

"I'm with you," cheered a voice from the edge of the circle of light — darkness had come on them as they talked — "I bet you we'll be

having fox cutlets for breakfast most any morning now."

It was Bud. He had eluded his guard, and now, stiff and sore but cheerful, he clamored for something to eat.

"Back to bed with you," ordered his father, but Mr. Cook, after hesitating a moment, guessed that it would be safe enough.

"He's only bumped up a trifle, John. I've seen you play through a game of football in lots worse shape than that—and want to fight the coach if he tried to pull you out. He'll get well quicker out of bed."

"You're a diplomat, youngster," remarked Mr. Jordan dryly. "See what you get for siding in with the doctor."

Don had slept so much all day that he felt he would never want to close his eyes again, but an hour or so around a roaring camp fire, to the accompaniment of lively tales of town and woods and water, found him rubbing his eyes in a vain effort to keep awake.

"Off to bed with you," shouted Mr. Cook, catching both boys in a healthy yawn; "that is, if you're going black-foxing with me at daybreak."

Night seemed to have been only fifteen minutes long when, at the first blink of dawn, Don felt himself vigorously shaken by the well shoulder and invited to turn out.

“I’ve fixed up a snack to eat when we get out of camp,” whispered Mr. Cook. “I don’t want those rounders waking up and giving us the laugh. No,” as he noticed Don’s glance straying over to where Bud was still asleep in the other bunk, “I guess he’d better rest another day in camp—he’s sorer than he thinks.”

Mr. Cook proved an ideal companion, and his jolly chatter soon drove the last trace of sleep from Don’s eyes. But the boy quickly learned that his amiable companion had much to learn about the gentle art of hunting. In the first place, he had a habit of whistling when excited—which was every time any game was in sight. Usually the sight was short, for the doctor’s whistle was penetrating. He fell down at the most luckless moments, and he *would* drag his gun after him in the most harebrained manner. Moreover, he could not follow a trail that lay wide open before him. Even Husk seemed disgusted after Mr. Cook had fozzled a perfectly *easy* shot at a fat wood duck.

The day wore on to noon, and they had tramped many a mile, but no black fox darted across their path, nor did Husk pick up a scent with that weird cry he seemed to have reserved for that one particular trail. The doctor's enthusiasm began to lag; he was getting hungry, and camp seemed a long way off. Don had long since lost his way, but he was conscious after a while that they were circling about, and so he was not greatly surprised when a view halloo sounded from a clearing dead ahead of them, and he saw Bud hobble out to meet them.

"Oh, you Black Foxers!" he sang out.

"Never you mind," cried Don. "I'll catch that fox if I have to go all the way to the North Pole. I said that once before. I mean it this time."

They were in for a good deal of chaffing that night at the table, but in the midst of it Mr. Ellis arose and made a little speech that put an end to the joshing.

"I've finally got the straight of this mule adventure, and it develops that somebody is a hero—a bloomin' hero with a bunged shoulder. And a dog, a shaggy old ruffian of a pup of a dog with a coat like a cocklebur—well, he's a

hero too. If they hadn't come just in time I'd have been minus a perfectly good son. And here at camp, he turns the trick again. I'm doubly grateful to you, my boy. I want you to know that. You are hereby elected an honorary member of this camp so long as you are willing to stay. And if there's any other way you will allow me to show my appreciation, just say the word."

"Motion unanimously carried," said Mr. Cook.

"Can't be carried till it's seconded," objected Mr. Lewis, whimsically; "but I second it."

"Count me in," urged Mr. Jordan, "when you pin on the medals. Bud's going to finish himself up anyway on one of his reckless excursions, but the delay is welcome just the same. What'll it be, Don?"

Don only grinned in embarrassment.

"I'll tell you what," suggested Bud. "We might get out and help him capture that fox—eh, Don? I'd hate to see the boy get stuck up there on the North Pole—that's where you said you were going to corner him, wasn't it? How about it, dad?"

"What's all this about a fox—a *black* fox, you say?" turning to Don.

“ Yes, sir. I told you how he escaped from Old Skags — Mr. Skagway — down at Lac du Chien. Well, I saw him night before last, at sundown, and if I can find my old camp, Husk here can pick up the trail. And he’ll hang onto it, too. Skags offered a thousand dollars to anybody that brought the fox back, or his hide, and I’m going to do it.”

“ But suppose you don’t — it’s a big country, you know,” objected Bud’s father. “ You’d still have the job ahead of you of making good. Just catching a fox won’t take you far through life, son. Here’s a proposition I want you to think over. Another week or so and we’re going back to the States — Chicago, most of us. I can easily find you a place where you can have your chance — where you can make good in the right way. It won’t give you a thousand dollars in one lump, of course, but at that you might have trouble in collecting from what’s-his-name. What do you say? ”

“ I’ve got to catch that fox first. I’m not ungrateful for your offer, but — but — well, dad needs a thousand dollars. I’ve got to make good in his eyes. Don’t you see — back there in Lac du Chien they all think I’m no good — a disgrace

to my name. My uncle Don was the town hero, and I—I—I am the town booby. If I come back there with that fox hide I can flap it in their faces." The boy was excited, but there was a determined look on his face that made them all look at him with new respect. "Don't you see? It's the first task I set myself. I can't give it up so easy and still expect anybody to think I've got anything in me worth while. It isn't the black fox I'm after—it's myself!"

Mr. Ellis nodded gravely. "Guess you're right. However, the offer's still open after you've got that hide tanned. In the meanwhile, I hope you've no objection to our helping you locate the hide-bearer."

"Huh," grunted Bud. "He'd better not have. I'm going out with him to-morrow, and we'll follow Husk's nose till dark, I tell you."

"That's a go," assented Don. "But you better grease up your leg muscles if you're going to trail along with me."

"Yes, to bed, all of you," ordered Bud's father. "We'll scour this country in forty directions. If that fox gets through he's a good one."

It was still starlight next morning when a piping hot breakfast put life into the yawning crowd.

Don, Bud and Husk were the first to start out, but the others were not far behind. They were to hunt in pairs, all planning to work toward the river, as Don's theory seemed to all to be a reasonable one.

Husk went yelping joyously ahead, paying no attention to the shouts of the two boys, who felt that a little more silence was necessary for success.

"All his hunting brains must be in his nose," teased Bud.

"He's never been taught," Don defended. "He's just a natural hunting dog that's had a little common ordinary purp bred into him. Besides, he isn't more than a puppy. Wait till I've trained him a little, and he gets his growth."

"How close was your camp to the river?" asked Bud abruptly.

"Right close. A half mile, maybe. Why?"

"We've got a canoe almost straight in from here. River swings to the south—maybe it's four miles. We might save time by cutting through and paddling down to where your hill is—what do you say?"

"Listens all right. Can you paddle?"

"Can I paddle? Can a mule kick? This way,

Husk, you old false alarm, we're going to the *Chenango*."

"Chenango? No, it's the St. Louis."

"Oh, sure, the river. *Chenango* is the canoe. Some canoe. Benoit, our guide, made it during the winter while he was laid up with a broken arm. Dr. Cook said it looked as if he had lost both legs, too."

In lively fashion they chattered along as they hiked the four odd miles to the river bank. Here they had a moment of fright when the boat was not to be seen in its usual place. However, they found it pulled high and dry on shore less than a hundred feet down stream. Husk climbed in and made his way without hesitation to the bow. Don sat amidships, on a pile of sacking, for there were no seats. Bud stood up at the stern and guided the boat with the paddle, the current here being swift enough to give them all the speed they desired. **The voyage was a delight** all the way, but of them all Husk enjoyed it most. He sat on his haunches, his forepaws curled under him, his neck crooked over the edge, and barked at every bubble.

The trip was placid enough until they had gone at least six miles. Then there was excite-

ment aplenty. A nasty-looking piece of rough water loomed ahead, literally mined with jagged rocks just barely below the surface. The current rushed through with choppy speed and the *Che-nango* bobbed about, slapped this way and that by waves and rocks.

Bud gripped his paddle tightly, and even Husk seemed impressed with the danger of the situation; at least his bark was silenced. As it was, this turned out to be a blessing.

Just at the end of the shallows, where the water rode smooth and deep again, a low bluff jutted well out over the water. Stark and sheer it rose from a dark, foam-spotted eddy, its abrupt end full fifty feet from the river. It was Don who first noted the queer-shaped rock, but it was Husk who discovered its lone occupant. The weird howl that Don had heard only twice before and that on memorable occasions, burst from the dog's throat.

"It's the black fox!" cried the astonished boy, even while his eyes were still scanning the shore line for the object of Husk's outburst. He reached for his rifle, but the movement was unfortunate. The uncertain craft keeled over and for a second it looked as if they would be

decorating the river. He leaned back abruptly, and the *Chenango* righted itself. At the same instant he looked upward.

On the very verge of the cliff stood the black fox. He was looking across the stream, apparently unheeding the three below there on the river. Then once more Husk's challenge rang out. The fox looked down. Three short barks rang through the river stillness. Bud had dropped his paddle, and his rifle swung to his shoulder. The last yip from above was echoed by a sharp report, and a brief puff of smoke floated over the canoe.

"Missed!" exclaimed Bud in disgust.

"Yip!" came from above, but all that was visible was the dull gray of the rocks and the dusky green of a tamarack that showed over the edge of the cliff.

"What if you did," consoled Don. "We've got his trail, and we'll reel it up as he winds it out. Come on, let's beach the boat and get to the top of that baby mountain."

CHAPTER IX

COBBLESTONE HILL

But their hard climb up to the summit of that rough browed and rougher sloped hill was of little avail. To be sure, Husk at once picked up the scent, followed it down an unseen path that anyone who had not seen the dog sure-foot down it would have said was only possible to wings; but there their satisfaction ended. A brook cut through the narrow defile, babbling its noisy way to the St. Louis. Here Husk dropped the trail, nor was he able to pick it up again. Up and down both sides of the brook he whined his eager way, but the fox might well have been drowned for all the scent he had left.

“ You know what I believe? ” ventured Bud at last, when even Husk had ceased his sniffing. “ I believe that Husk followed a double trail. The fox came down here to get a drink and then went back up. There’s birds up there a plenty; it’s a fine feeding ground. When we saw him

he either left by a different route — or he's still there."

"Easy to find out. Come on, Husk — back to the hill."

They circled the base from river edge to river edge, but not once did Husk show any excitement. It was well past noon now, and the two boys were nearly starved, so, leaving the dog still scouting about with a kind of ever-busy aimlessness, they built up a roaring fire. When the dead wood had died into a fine bed of coals, they proceeded to cook a simple but satisfying dinner. Bud produced three big potatoes from his coat pockets. Don disgorged a great hunk of bread, a packet of sliced bacon. Bud wound up the feast offerings with a raw onion.

Every last scrap was eaten, Husk accounting for the potato skins. "Now what shall we do?" Bud wanted to know, leaning back comfortably against a tree trunk.

"Find the trail," asserted Don, springing to his feet.

"But Husk has already given it up."

"Sure. But Husk is depending on his nose entirely. When I'm hunting, and get left on a cold trail, I put myself in the other fellow's

place. Nine times out of ten, if you lose your game, it's because you underrated your opponent's brains. I'll give Mr. Fox credit for as much trail sense as one of us. But we've got a pair of brains—and a nose—against one brain and four feet. Now there's one thing we haven't thought of."

"What's that?"

"Suppose that fox waited, and saw us land, and watched us leave our boat and climb up that cliff——"

"And sneaked back and got in that boat and rowed himself across, I suppose!"

"Ninny! He skulked until we had given up the search. Then, like a flash, he dashed off—in what direction?"

"Away from us, of course."

"Of course not. He wouldn't go back. He'd follow the river, on a bet."

"I thought you were giving him credit for brains. He might know we'd——"

"But you just said he wouldn't. I say let's follow the river a few miles, then cut a straight line in, till we hit his trail."

"You talk as if you had it all drawn on a map."

“ Well, come on, let’s put our own trail on that map. We don’t gain anything standing here.”

Off through the tangled brush that lined the river they trudged. Something like a mile upstream they struck off inland, but had gone only a few hundred yards when Husk set their nerves on edge by starting up a perfect ballyhoo of yelps and barks. He was some distance ahead and hid in the brush. Bud set off at a run, shouting excitedly.

“ He’s flushed the fox! He’s flushed the fox! ”

Don only laughed. “ Keep your shirt on, old man. That’s not his fox yelp.” But he too followed close at Bud’s heels.

Nor was it. Husk had flushed game of quite a different breed and calibre, as his hasty retreat bore witness. He had come to close quarters with a porcupine, who had presented Husk with several tokens of his regard. All but one quill the dog dislodged, but that one was imbedded deep in the end of his nose. Don could not help laughing as Husk fought madly against the innocent looking spine sticking straight out before him.

Once more they were under way. Of a sudden

Husk seemed to whirl about in his tracks and cut back toward the river, over almost the same ground they had just traversed. Bud was for calling the dog back; he had not sounded the "fox note," he complained.

"Let him have his head," urged Don, setting out briskly in the wake of the fast disappearing dog. "He knows what he's doing."

"Shucks!" snorted Bud. "Bet he's just going back to finish that hedgehog."

But Husk soon made it evident that he was not. Without hesitating, without once lifting his nose from the ground, he bore directly north and west, bearing steadily in toward the river. When within a hundred yards of the St. Louis he turned abruptly and single-footed it westward. Mile after mile he kept up the same unexcited gait, still within sight of the river. They were drawing near camp, but the dog did not pause.

"There's your father!" cried Don as they burst through a stretch of hard maple and came out in a swampy clearing. "Off there by that clump of sumach. Shall we call him?"

"Oh, dad!" hallooed Bud by way of answer.

At the shout Husk stopped and looked back at

the two boys inquiringly, but at once resumed his gait. Fortunately the scent swung inland here, and the three reached the light growth of birch forest close to where Mr. Ellis had halted. Don darted ahead and brought Husk to a forcible halt.

"We saw the fox, dad," cried Bud excitedly, "and he's a sure enough black one. Husk's nosing him right along, and by Christmas I guess we'll catch up with him."

"Huh," grunted Mr. Ellis. "Just about. What you going to do now?"

"Why, catch him, of course."

"Got any salt to put on his tail?"

"Oh, yes — *saltpetre*, with a little lead for seasoning."

"You're limping," said his father shortly. "I expect you'd better drift back to camp with me now. You don't want to overdo on those bumps and bruises of yours, son. We'll mark the trail, and Husk here can pick it up in the morning."

"But he'll be miles ahead of us by then!"

"He's miles ahead now. At the rate you two were hobbling along, he's making six miles to your one — that is, if he knows he's being chased.

But a fox doesn't run long at a time. He's got to stop and feed, you know, and he's got to catch his meal first. If he finds good feeding grounds he may stop several days. That's your only chance of overtaking him. A night's rest may improve your chances."

Both boys were pretty well tuckered out, and there was no excitement in the chase with the quarry well out of sight, so they made no great objection to the return to camp. There they found the rest of the party waiting for news. They were all excitement when they heard the boys' story, and Doctor Cook was all for starting out at once, tired as he was. But Mr. Ellis promptly squelched any such plan.

"It'll be dark in two hours," he said, "and then where'd you be? Wait till morning and we'll all be fresh for the hard grind."

They all went to bed early, Don because he was frankly sleepy, and Bud because his muscles began to stiffen up the minute he sat still. The men sat about a half hour or so, smoking and gossiping, then they too turned in. Through the night Don was conscious of feeling cold even under his heavy blanket, and he was not at all surprised next morning when he looked out into

the half light and saw the ground covered with a heavy coating of white frost. His cry to Bud woke all the rest of the crew and soon brought them chattering to the warmth of the big fire Louis quickly built up.

Steaming hot coffee seemed to reach the right spot that morning, and the fried potatoes and ham disappeared as if by magic. Don was impatient to be off, and his eagerness seemed shared by all the rest. The party started off in a bunch. Soon they began to straggle along, and when they reached the spot where Husk's eager voice told that the trail was once more picked up, Don and Bud and his father were the only ones in sight. However, they did not wait, as it had been agreed that they were all to course toward the west and north, following the bends of the river. The plan was a flexible one; the expedition was to end only with the capture of the fox. The two guides, who had been left behind, were even now busy packing up "Hazel," the meek team-mate of Jud, with a plentiful supply of blankets and grub.

It was plain to be seen that all the men were conspiring to give the two boys first chance at the Black Fox—Don guessed that the minute

Mr. Jordan remarked, after they had reached what promised to be a big bend of the St. Louis, that he guessed he'd short-cut through and wait for them where the river swung back again. Don spoke of it to Bud, who did not pause to answer—he had just knocked the breath out of himself over a vine-hidden log.

The hunting party was destined to be further divided; just as they came to a weedy but fair-sized lake, Don noticed a movement of the overhanging bushes on the far side, a good half mile across, and a dark-hued object scrambled out of the water and disappeared in the brush. Husk insisted on turning to the right at this point, while the swimming animal had been nearly three-quarters of the way around on the other side of the lake.

The two boys called a halt, and it was decided that one should stay with the dog and the other investigate. Inasmuch as Bud had seen nothing, it was up to him to stay with the dog. Don hurried off, finding that his circle was much larger than he had expected, as the shore was boggy for a good hundred feet inland.

When he drew near the place where he had seen the object darting through the bushes, his pace

became slower. A disquieting suspicion had entered his mind; he heard a sound that was unmistakably human. It was a laugh, he felt sure, but there was something familiar about its tone, that made him halt and then go forward with all caution. The laugh was repeated, but this time shorter, rougher. He *had* heard it before, when, he did not know—but somehow his mind leaped back to that day when he and Husk had first become acquainted. Could it be——

Don's slow approach became as stealthy as an Indian's: without a sound he sneaked through the second-growth timber that bordered the lake. To his nostrils came the sure sign of human presence—the smoke of a camp fire. Barely thirty feet away a smoldering log showed through the rank woods growth.

Don's caution now became almost painful. He could see no one about the camp fire, but a bulky outline just beyond looked as if it might be the back of a man lying down. He drew nearer. Suddenly he was startled out of about a year's growth. A shrill voice cackled in his ear.

“Well, young feller, where d'ye think yer goin', eh?”

Don wheeled, half raised his rifle, and then let it drop, in amazement and unbelief. It was not Hank Clem. It was no one he had the faintest idea of seeing here in these remote woods.

Old Skags!

In his excitement Don almost blurted out the man's name in greeting. Afterwards he was glad he had restrained the impulse, for the man made it very evident that he did not recognize his visitor.

"Didn't skeer ye, did I? Never aimed to. Was ye lookin' for somebody or somethin'?"

"Well, yes," said Don, frankly enough. "I was — am. It was a fox. The rest of the party went around the other side of the lake here — with the dog. But I thought I saw something along the water's edge, and I couldn't be satisfied till I had looked into it."

"And ye didn't figure none, I take it, on runnin' onto a camp fire."

"It did kind of startle me, especially since the last one I ran into sort of cured me of inviting myself to visit another. A hobo it was. But you're a hunter, I can see, like myself, so I'm not worried much this time."

“ Hope not,” and Skagway laughed heartily. “ Yep, I may say as I’m a hunter, though I don’t know thet I’m keen on foxes — not this trip, I ain’t.”

“ Not *this* trip? ” Don pretended curiosity — and felt it too.

“ Last trip I was a real fox hunter — well I guess! *Black* foxes! ”

“ Black — get out! There’s no such animal. I never saw one, and I’ve been through these woods — ”

“ Course you never. ’Cause why? Huh, you’ll go a sight fu’ther north than this — plumb to the ice cap — ’fore ye find the black fox. And ye won’t run ’em down in a day, nor find more’n one in a week’s travel.”

“ Too much work, I should say, for the little sport there’s in it. Now if it was bear — ”

“ Bear? Sport? Do I look like a man that hunts fer sport. Mazuma, tin, spelter — dust! That’s what makes me sight my gun-barrel.”

“ But you can’t make much — ”

“ With hides worth three thousand dollars apiece! ”

“ Get out! ” And Don threw back his head in boisterous laughter.

“Laugh!” exclaimed Skagway, just a bit peeved. “You know what I made on my last trip? Huh! I sold two pelts up at the trading camp — that was before I knew what they *was* worth. Five hundred apiece. One fox I brought back alive, and I sold him for the full three thousand!”

The preposterous yarn was almost too much for Don, but he managed to keep his face straight as he asked: “How does it come you’re not going back for more? Four thousand a trip — ”

Skagway closed one eye in a prodigious wink. “I ain’t a-sayin’ I ain’t.” He sat down against the fallen tree which formed the back-log for his fire, and stretching himself out comfortably, he looked up with a great air of shrewdness and added:

“There’s one man up here in these woods — Oh, not here, but plumb hundreds o’ miles north, way t’other side the Barrens — and if I could find him, the two of us’d be the richest pelt hunters that ever came out o’ the north country. The last time I saw him he told me a yarn about a regular pack o’ those black foxes — regular pack, mind you — that he’d run across. And the

durn fool wouldn't shoot ary o' them because their hides weren't fox colors. Either he was a plumb fool or he was playing me fer one. And I *was* — then."

"You don't look like anybody's fool now," ventured Don, hoping to flatter more story out of the man. He succeeded.

"Not so's you could notice it," he answered with a self-satisfied chuckle. "If I was, I'd be telling ye all about this place so's you could chase right up there and bag a million dollars' worth."

"But you just told me you don't know the way yourself."

"Sure enough you're right. I don't. That man used to be my pal. I saved his life onct when everybody else had given him up — and never dared tell I'd saved him neither. But he must have suspicioned something about the vally of them black fox hides — he sure gave me directions for finding the place that tuck me right next door to nowhere. And after me pledgin' him that — Oh, well, you don't care nothin' about that."

"It sounds like a good yarn to me — if I'm not taking your time."

“ Kind o’ lost interest in that fox of your own, ain’t ye? ” teased the man.

“ Kind of,” agreed Don. “ Those black foxes are some *game!* ”

“ The hardest to ketch they is. Can’t trap ’em nohow, and they can duck bullets like you’d dodge a snowball. But if my friend hadn’t thrown me down —— ”

“ It was a mean trick,” asserted Don.

“ O’ course,” added Skagway, “ he might have been tellin’ me as straight as he knew it himself. He was kind o’ wobbly in his mind, and if a feller didn’t take jist the right turn by the big lake, and didn’t sight from the right big hill, and happened to get twisted when he crossed the last stretch of barrens before he hit the river or creek or whatever it was, he’d never find it. Leastways I never did—it nor the cabin there by the cobblestone hill —— ”

“ Cobblestone? ”

“ That’s what he called it. Niggerheads I guess they were maybe. I found the big lake—no,” as the boy looked out toward where the gleam of water showed through the trees, “ no, *this* ain’t it, ye don’t need to think. Ye said somethin’ when ye said I was nobody’s fool, and

just because you're a green kid ain't no sign I'd be tellin' ye anything about this place if there was the leastest chanct that ye'd ever find it."

"Don't worry," laughed Don reassuringly. "I can just see myself getting that gang of soft-water hunters across the Barrens!"

"It's no place for anybody with a weak heart, that's a fact," remarked Skagway, getting up and stretching himself. "I ate three of my dogs the last time I tried it—and I didn't hanker to go back for *some* time."

"Well," remarked Don by way of parting, "if I happen to run up against any cobblestone hills I'll send you word."

"Or if you run up against a feller by the name of——" he stopped abruptly. "Small chance," he added, "of yer seeing him or me, again. Woods luck to ye," as Don turned to go.

A low growl stopped him at the first step.

"Down, Don, ye old cur!" Don turned, startled and somewhat alarmed, but he saw that the man was addressing a rough-coated mongrel that looked at least three parts wolf to one part dog. He noted that his hair was wet, and turned to the man with a question on his lips. The man answered it before it was asked.

“Guess that’s the fox ye saw, young feller. He just come from a swim in the lake.”

“Name’s Don, is it? That’s my name, too.”

“Yep — named after a pardner of mine onct — a genuine pardner while it lasted. Fact is he ——” he paused, then laughed shortly — “fact is, he’s the man what steered me away from them black foxes!”

CHAPTER X

STARTLING NEWS

When Don finally found Bud, and with him the rest of the hunters, he said nothing of his unexpected encounter. Imaginative Don had been startled by the man's story; a train of conjecture had been started in his mind, although he realized that a fair proportion of the man's story had been pure invention. Still ——

But Mr. Cook, true to form, had brought along a basket of lunch, and the crowd was too hungry to talk of anything but eating, and when they were once more ready to start out, Don had made up his mind to keep his news to himself. Husk still held the scent and was eager to be off.

The afternoon wore on; nothing happened. Dark found them in big timber, so all that was needed in the way of preparation was a big camp fire and a soft bed of pine needles over which to spread a blanket. They slept by twos, so that each had a cover. Along toward morning a bed-

fellow was a luxury, as the night air had a decided kink in it.

“October first,” exclaimed Mr. Ellis as he finally rolled out and proceeded to throw brush on the fire. “Another week and we’ll have to hike back to civilization. Better tell your old fox to hustle up if he expects us to catch him. There’ll be ice on the pools in another two weeks.”

“Yes,” added Bud, “add another week or so and there’ll be a skimmer of ice across the river — and then good-bye, fox!”

“Yes,” agreed Don, but confidently. “It *will* mean a longer chase.”

“Oh, you couldn’t hope to overtake him once he gets across the St. Louis,” remonstrated Mr. Ellis. “No, if we don’t land him before we have to go back, you’d better make up your mind to travel along with us, Don.”

Don shook his head stubbornly. “I’ve got to get him — if it takes all winter. I could never look myself in the face — ”

“If you could now,” grinned Bud, “you’d wash it.”

“Yours is nothing to pattern after in that respect,” reminded his father. “Well, men,

let's be off. Maybe we won't have to make any decision. Seven mighty hunters —— ”

“ And a dog,” added Bud. “ See if the rest of you can't manage to keep up to-day. It's mighty tiresome waiting for you.”

As they all rose, Husk darted off. Don and Bud set out on a run to overtake him, and the rest began stringing out in characteristic fashion. This time each carried his own lunch, a slender enough portion, for the guides were not to come up until night. The two boys were soon far ahead, with Husk leading them by a full hundred feet, though he waited every now and then for them to catch up.

The character of the ground had changed. There were no longer any stretches of prairie and swamp. The hills were low, but set close together, and their slopes were covered with stunted pines, while the narrow valleys were rank with vegetation; a tiny creek cut through nearly every ravine. It made hard trailing, and now the boys followed close at Husk's heels. It was well they did, for of a sudden a wild yelp of surprise and pain came from the dog and he bounded back from the dense thicket into which he had just nosed his way. Blood was spurting

from a long, ragged gash across his shoulder.

“What do you suppose ——”

“It’s not from any thorn,” began Don, bending over to examine the wound. “It looks like ——” But just then the question was answered. An infuriated roar burst from the copse, and suddenly the bushes were violently shaken by a huge hairy form that emerged almost upon them.

“A bear!”

The exclamation burst from both boys — as they scrambled out of the way. But the big beast paid no attention to the two boys. He made another swipe at Husk, who had fallen back on his haunches. The ripping blow of the bear’s paw would have caught him full in the side only that he did the unexpected; he leaped full at the animal’s throat. But his spring was too hurried. He caught at the shaggy neck but bit only matted hair. The force of his leap pulled his jaws loose, and he fell in a sprawling heap. The bear was upon him.

Crack! crack! two rifles spoke. The clumsy brute wheeled — as if in surprise. With a hoarse bellow he plunged at the nearer of the two, who happened to be Don. The bear was upon him

before he could pull down his gun, and his shot went wild; then he turned and ran, full pelt, the bear after him. Unfortunately, Don was right in the line of fire, so Bud could not use his rifle. The chase was brief. Don stumbled over a wild raspberry vine, plunged full length, burying his nose in the soft ground. The bear was right on him. Don, desperate, tried his best to roll to one side, but his foot was held fast. He shut his eyes.

But another actor came on the scene. Husk. Snarling like mad, he attacked the bear from the rear. He managed to sink his teeth in a tender spot, and the exasperated animal forgot all about the prostrate boy. In fact he acted as if he would be glad to forget all about the dog as well, for Husk was out of reach and he held on like a burr. It was almost laughable, for the dog was almost lost against his ponderous adversary. In just about ten seconds Mr. Bear was well satisfied to leave the field of honor. He scrambled madly through the brush, Husk holding grimly on.

The boys followed the trail as best they could, floundering and winded. They rounded a hill and there, unexpectedly, the St. Louis sparkled in the sunshine. But where was Husk — and the

bear? They peered about, excited and anxious. Then Bud laughed.

“Look — they’re in the river.”

At least the bear was. Husk was nowhere to be seen.

“I’ll bet he’s still holding on,” cried Don. “Do you suppose we dare take a chance — ” But just then a violent commotion in the water, and a tawny body shot up a few feet in the rear of the fleeing bear. Bruin kept on swimming, faster now. Husk, after trying vainly to catch up, finally heard the frantic calls of the boys and reluctantly turned back to shore. The boys somehow could not bring themselves to shoot at the escaping bear, but their welcome to Husk made that water-logged animal almost shake his sponge-like tail off.

A rest seemed necessary, and the three sat down and waited till the rest of the party came up. A good hour was wasted in telling the story of the narrow escape and in eating a snack. Then Husk went back to his scent and they settled down to the trail.

The afternoon wore on, and once more they reached a stretch of prairie grass, dry and sere. The grass crackled under their feet and dust

rose in great clouds to choke their nostrils and make them all long for water. The sun coursed across the flat expanse, lower and lower.

"We're late," remarked Mr. Ellis. "Louis and Benoit are to make camp at Lake Winipsi — we fished there last year. It's really only a little bay of the St. Louis, but it's way beyond this flat country. I remember it stood in a nest of trees. As far as I can see, this level stretches all the way from here to the sunset."

"But there's trees in the north, by the river," suggested Bud. "Maybe we're already there and don't know it."

"The black fox is our route maker." It was Dr. Cook who said it, but a sigh went with the statement. The doctor had wiped several pounds of his jolly weight from his steaming face. "But if he doesn't swing over pretty soon we'll have to abandon him to his fate."

But Husk went straight ahead, following the course of the sun. It sank in a blaze of pink and gold glory. Night would drop suddenly.

"There's smoke due north of us," noticed Bud. "It must be the camp."

They all looked, Husk stopping with them and showing a half-foot of panting tongue.

"It's the guides all right," said Mr. Ellis finally. "Guess we'd better start while we've still got daylight. Husk ought to be able to pick up the trail in the morning if we cut straight south again."

"I could pick it up myself," laughed Don. He waved his hand and pointed ahead. "Look right ahead of us."

A creek had once wandered its shallow way across the prairie, its bed now a dry plaster of grayish mud. "I'll just scratch our sign on that clay, and we can easy scout it up to-morrow." He ran ahead and drew his heel across the twenty-foot breadth, then followed the rest, who had already started off toward where a trickle of heavy smoke broke through the trees a good two miles away.

It was a hungry crew that burst shouting upon the camp some thirty minutes later. The two guides were ready for them, as the appetizing odors from the fire testified. But before anyone had time to do more than sniff, Louis, in his broken English, exclaimed:

"Mr. Ellis, the Ranger she come on de camp so soon you be gone."

"Who — Merritt? Any message?"

"Not'ing she don' say, never-mind she geeve me dis."

"Dis " proved to be a yellow envelope.

"A telegram!" exclaimed Bud.

"For me?" asked Mr. Ellis, as he reached to take it. Louis shrugged his shoulders expressively: he could not read, and the Ranger, "she," had not said.

Mr. Ellis tore open the envelope, gave one glance at the brief contents, his face turning a curious, pinched white. He opened his mouth as if to speak, looking up at the others, who waited expectantly. Then he paused and moistened his lips.

"Six weeks delayed!" he finally gasped. "Six weeks lost."

"What's the trouble, old man?" It was Dr. Cook who came forward, clapping his hand on Mr. Ellis' shoulder. "Count on us for any help we ——"

"You may need the help yourself, Doc. It hits you all just as much as it does me. It's war."

"Impossible!" The exclamation burst from all. "America at war?" added the doctor.

"Not—not yet," slowly. "All the rest of

the world — nearly. Germany, Austria, more maybe, against France, England, Russia. Belgium has been invaded, big battles have been fought. All the world is war mad. We may be in it next. America is in the midst of a tremendous financial and industrial panic — business is paralyzed. Mine — yours — we may be paupers all of us this minute.” A smile lit up his eyes. “Bud, you may have to stay and capture that black fox to lift a few mortgages of your own father’s.”

Bud said nothing, but his eyes grew big and round.

“I guess that puts a period to our hunting trip, all right, though,” remarked Mr. Ellis, casually enough, though his voice trembled ever so slightly. “Our house deals heavily in German securities — it looks bad.”

The other men spoke in the same vein, and gloom settled down over the camp till the doctor spoke. “Well, at least we know where the next meal’s coming from. As for me, I guess, war or no war, people will go on being sick and getting well, and being born and dying. And there may be a place for me at the front.”

“A *big* place, Doc,” joked Mr. Ellis.

“My son will be with the first contingent,” said the doctor with a simple dignity that hushed the laughter.

The meal was a silent one. The news was too big, too startling, too meager in its details, to be talked out in long arguments. One could only catch his breath at the thought. The *big* war — the biggest the world had ever known.

“We’ll spend one more night in the woods,” remarked Mr. Ellis, as they rose from the table. “We’ll gain nothing by starting back to the cabins before morning. Daybreak should see us breaking camp. How about you, Don? You’re going with us, of course.”

“But if the war — your business — ” hesitated Don.

“Don’t let that worry you. The wealthiest country in the world, in real money, in resource, isn’t going to be stunned long. If we don’t fight it will mean the biggest business we have ever known in furnishing supplies to whichever of the combatants controls the seas. There’ll be a place for you all right.”

“Mr. Ellis, I don’t want you to think I don’t appreciate — ”

“Look here, son, you’ve got the right shoe,

but you've got it on the wrong foot. I'm the one that's grateful. You saved Bud's life; there's no —— ”

“ We'll not say anything about that. But I do appreciate your offer to see that I get a start, and some day maybe I can take you up on it. But I've started out to do something, and I've got to finish it. I don't want the first job I tackled to be a failure.”

“ You're looking at it cross-eyed, Don. You're not failing; you're just changing your mind. You thought the capture of that fox would mean success for you, and you found that something else promised a bigger success.”

“ I know that looks right to you, and if it did to me I'd be glad to go along. But it don't. I set myself a job. It's turned out harder than I thought it would be. The folks back home would say I'd give it up. That's why I can't. If I could make *five* thousand dollars in the same time it will take me to capture the *one* the black fox means, I'm afraid I'd have to keep going. I've got to justify my faith in myself—to myself.”

“ Not another word, Don. I'm with you,” said Mr. Ellis warmly. “ And whether you fail

or win, remember that there's a place and a chance for you in Chicago, and you know where to find me."

"And so you won't fail," added Doctor Cook, "here's a little old watch-charm compass that may stand you in good stead some day. I—I—admire your pluck. That compass saved my life—my father gave it to me."

Don could not say a word of thanks, his throat seemed suddenly so full.

"I ain't got nothin' to give you—and you saved my life, as dad says. But back in the cabin there's the dandiest pair of snowshoes, and some moccasins Louis made for me, and a combination sleeping bag and blanket roll—you've got to take 'em."

"All right, old scout," agreed Don, "but I can't get 'em till I go back. I'd lose four days, you know, and maybe the fox on top of that."

"I'll tell you what, dad! Let Louis go along with Don!"

Louis looked up as he heard his name. Mr. Ellis looked at him inquiringly.

"Me?" asked the Canadian. "Me, so soon my time be free, I go Toronto. I leeve dere. Canada she be send troops to fight for England,

me —— ” he shrugged his shoulders — “ I don’t know. She fight for Labelle France too, I go, queeck, right off.”

“ Good for you! ” exclaimed Don. “ Don’t you worry about me, any of you.”

“ At least we can fit you out with a grub-stake. Louis has brought beans, peas, flour, salt, some meat, plenty of tea. Take along all you can lug, and a couple of blankets. Bud’s cartridges fit your gun — take ’em all. Matches — we can empty all our pockets. And anything else you think you can use that we’ve got, why speak right up.”

“ You’ve already offered all I need. I won’t try to thank you — I guess you understand.” His voice almost broke.

“ We’ll cache what you can’t carry,” proposed the doctor. “ The canned goods will keep and so will a lot of other truck. Hi — ho — hum — I guess I’ll hit the hay — or what passes for it up here in the wilderness. Thank heaven, before many days I can sleep on a real bed.”

“ And wake up a dozen times in the night and miss the smell of pine and the stars and the smoke of the camp fire,” amended Mr. Ellis.

A sigh, five strong, echoed his words.

Don lay long awake. In a way he felt almost relieved. He was coming to love these hearty, generous men, and he enjoyed their companionship, yet their stake was not as high as his; they were not willing to rough it as he was, to endure and suffer—and drive ahead. To-morrow, he felt, the real hunt of the black fox would begin. With some such thought as that he fell asleep, snuggled close to Bud for warmth.

Through a delightful dream in which he had returned triumphant, his mother's face beaming with pride and joy, he heard vaguely a great shouting. He stirred uneasily and then sat up. He was alone in the blankets, but bending over him was his late bed fellow.

"Wake up, Don, or you'll get sunburned. It's been daylight for half an hour."

"Then I must have gone stone blind. What you got the pine knot blazing for? Mislaid a piece of that daylight and out looking for it?"

"No I was going to set fire to your bed—it seemed the only way we could wake you up."

Don was soon up, rubbing his eyes. Sure enough, Louis had breakfast ready and the other men were waiting before they pitched in. The meal was a mighty simple one and there was

little ceremony in its eating. They simply filled themselves, then jumped to their feet and set about making final preparations for breaking camp. Don was early through, and Louis came over and led him to where a great cairn of rocks had been collected and heaped up.

"The grub. She is all there. Here is for to carry. A month it will eat you. Salt, sugar, flour, tea — all is here and of a plenty."

"Fine!" cried Don, but his enthusiasm did not sound convincing even to his own ears.

At last they were all ready to start. They had all been talking to Don at once. There came a sudden silence, then one by one, without a word, each came and grasped the boy's hand in a shake that was to mean much in the hard days to come. Bud was last; he alone broke the silence.

"Good-bye, Don. I tried to get dad to let me stick with you. I — I — darn it all! — I bet you get the black fox!"

A few minutes later Don Blackburn was alone in the big Northwest.

CHAPTER XI

ALONE IN THE BARRENS

That was the beginning of a long, hard grind that tested every fibre of endurance in Don Blackburn. It meant day after day of wild hope that ended each time in disappointment, of a scent that seemed hot in the morning, but that before evening sent Husk doubling on his tracks in impatient bewilderment. It meant false starts and blind clews; it meant supperless camps and dinnerless trails. It meant cold autumn winds and marrow-chilling rains, sodden forests and fog-hovered swamps. It was well Don had Husk along for companionship; the wild waste places were peopled only with discouragement and lonesome shadows. It was filled with a silence that makes a man feel that he must talk or go insane. It is well in such places for a hunter to have a companion or a dog; otherwise he finds himself talking to his gun, the trees, the elusive shadow things of forest and fields and stream.

So Don talked to Husk.

“ Well, old boy,” he said when he had watched Bud and the rest disappear into the dawn-light, “ I guess it’s up to us to go it alone. So let’s see if we can pick up the trail.” He shouldered the bundle Louis had made for him. “ But I don’t guess we’ll go back to where we left off. If I know anything at all, that dried-up brook once ran into the St. Louis. Mr. Fox knows that as well as I do. After his dusty race across that prairie, he’d just about be prime for a drink. He’d follow up that run, knowing it would lead him to water. So we’ll just cut across lots till we hit the creek bed or the creek itself. Let’s hit her up.”

Don’s guess proved to be correct. A mile upstream they found a shallow creek, and after following its winding course a few minutes they came to where it dwindled to a bare trickle and then disappeared in sun-baked mud. Here Husk gave one sniff and then raised his voice in the thrilling note that Don knew meant the fox.

At a trot they started off. All day long the trail lay plain before them, Don more than once recognizing the signs himself. Toward noon they saw where the fox had made a kill, that same day, as the blood splotches testified, for they

were still crimson. At one spot Husk stopped a long while; Don saw that the grass had been pressed down as if the fox had lain there some time, resting perhaps or watching for game.

Just before dusk a boggy stretch foiled Husk a long while, and Don finally decided to camp on the near side, trusting to be able to pick up the trail next morning on firm ground. Somehow, by this time, the boy saw the task in its true light: a long, hard fight against a wily foe. But he only set his jaw and once more resolved that he would carry it through at any cost.

The next day was merely a repetition. The trail was picked up once more, after a delay of over an hour. Twice that day they came upon little nests in the sparse grass, but this time there was no trace, of fur or feathers, that told of a hasty meal. Don nodded grimly; it meant a point in his favor, although it meant, as well, that the fox had traveled that much farther.

That night Don heard the noise of wildfowl disturbed in some watery retreat. Husk heard it too and growled, coming restively over to where Don lay. The boy quieted him. "We'll look them up in the morning, Husk. I think it's our friend Blackie lining his ribs."

Before daybreak the two were astir. The chill mists were rising from a tiny lily-padded pond. A few wood ducks made dark dots on its weedy margin, apparently still asleep. Don drew a careful bead on the nearest one and shot it through the head. Before he could fire again the rest had whirred away in squawking flight. Husk retrieved the one and Don made a hasty job of dressing it. His experience with cooking this sort of game was rather limited, but he managed to roast a few strips of breast; the rest he wrapped in leaves and took along to bake in mud as he had the fish.

The trail of the fox led to the far side of the pond, so Don had renewed hopes that they were gaining; undoubtedly he had been right in his surmise as to the source of the midnight disturbance. But they caught no sight of the fleeing animal, either that day or the next. Signs, however, led Don to think that they were drawing nearer and nearer. But there was one circumstance that puzzled him. The fox was resting much by the way. It was easy to tell where he had slept through the night, and that well-packed nest Don could easily understand. But at intervals of four or five hours, that is, some three

times through the day, there were the same matted grass nests. Once, even, when he put his hand in one he found it still warm. Don could not understand it. Why should an unwounded fox rest two or three times between daylight and dark?

The next day they lost the trail. It seemed to vanish into thin air. Though they retraced their steps, and coursed far to either side, not the least trace could they find. The look of perplexity on Husk's face was comical in the extreme. Finally the explanation came to Don, but there was little consolation in knowing the why of their failure, especially since a whole day had been lost. There had been a local rainstorm, one of those freaks of coming winter. They had been just outside its fringe; once they crossed into the rainswept region the scent of the fox had been washed from the sparse grass of the prairie.

Still, next morning found them pressing resolutely ahead, hoping to pick up the scent on the other side of the storm area. Don noted with growing alarm that the St. Louis seemed smaller each time he came out upon its banks, until now it was barely a brook. It would not be much

farther that its silver ribbon of width would hold the black fox from the long, straight trail into the northland. Indeed, now that Husk had lost the scent, Don more than half feared that his prize had slipped out of his reach and was trotting eagerly into the winds that swept winter-laden from the homeland among the snow plains.

It took till noon next day to make sure that the fox was still on the south side of the St. Louis, and by night Don felt sure that he and Husk had cut down the fugitive's lead; but that slight consolation vanished next morning when a starlight excursion to the river for water revealed a film of ice extending far out from shore. It would only be a few more days now until that ice would extend all the way across, thick enough to bear the weight of the light-boned fox.

That afternoon there were flurries of snow in the air, and towards night the wind was chill and wintry. Don built the fire up higher than usual and pitched camp against a huge boulder that shut off the north wind. When he awoke in the early dawn light a feathery blanket of snow covered his bedding and was still falling hissing into the embers of his dying fire. Husk lay with

his nose almost in the coals, though a bare spot showed where he had snuggled close to the sleeping boy through the night.

Breakfast that morning was a cheerless meal, for no game had fallen to Don's rifle in the last few days, and their slender stock of provisions was dwindling more rapidly than he liked. However, the snowfall ought to help him bag a rabbit at least. It did more than that; it made the trail of the fox as simple as A-B-C. Somehow, the sight of that even line of footprints cheered the boy more than anything that had happened since the long hunt began. It was a sort of visible link between pursuer and pursued.

But Don trembled in a panic of foreboding every time the dainty pits veered toward the river. If only the freeze-up would hold off another few days!

By three o'clock the snow had pretty well disappeared, but about that time a light film of gray stole over the sky and a wail of wind came from across the river; every passing minute seemed to grow colder. By five a regular blizzard had settled over them and the sky was as storm-dark as night. Don was glad to make the scanty shelter of a stand of timber and there

make camp, although the country thereabouts was cheerless enough in all conscience.

The night that followed was one long to be remembered. Both snow and rain searched out every unprotected spot, and what they began the swirling wind finished. The camp fire sulked save when a gust of wind strewed flaming brands across the bare ground. At intervals all through the night Don awoke, wretched and chilled to the bone. No pile of blankets, he was sure, could have shut out the searching rawness.

Morning brought a slight ray of cheer, for in a landlocked bay left behind by low water Don captured a fat trout that would have weighed over four pounds. The wetting that paid for the prize was cheerfully accepted, and Husk was almost frantic with delight as Don tossed him fins and tail and head. Don himself rubbed gleefully a stomach that a little later held a generous portion of fish. Much heartened the two set out into the graying world. The wind had died down but the cold had increased. There had been heavy ice on the bay where he had caught the trout, but the high winds had kept the river from freezing, so Don was thankful for the day of grace.

Night found it much warmer, with a hint of snow or rain in the air. The wind had risen again but was blowing out of the southwest. As the sun dipped below the horizon a sudden stillness seemed to drop over the world. Not a breath of air was stirring. Not a woods creature broke the silence. Like a weather-wise graybeard Husk stood sniffing the air. Don did not need to sniff; he well knew what was coming.

Snow!

It must have been nine o'clock when it began. By midnight, when Don rose to replenish the fire, his pile of wood showed only as a white, rounded mound. Even Husk was a shaggy snow-pile with an ermine tail. It was not cold, almost balmy in fact, and Don was grateful for that. But he was vaguely disquieted as he dropped back into his blankets. Too much snow would make his task a hard one.

Before morning another circumstance increased the boy's misgivings. Husk had roused him from deep slumber by low-toned growls that were repeated many times as the slow dawn wore on. Deep footprints showed in the snow next morning, that came up close beside the spot where Don had cached the slender remnant of the fish,

footprints whose size and distance between hind and forefeet left no doubt of the identity of their makers. Wolves. Don had seen them about Lac du Chien, great gaunt fellows whose boldness when winters were cold was the subject of many grim stories about the round-oak stove in Crossett's store. He did not relish their companionship.

Once more the trail of the fox was distinct and easy to follow, but this time there were many cross trails. Rabbit and wolf and polecat and porcupine, Don was able to identify each, but there were many strange footprints in the deep whiteness. Once he was startled; a long, heeled and toed mark, much like that made by a moccasined foot, paralleled a tiny feeder stream of the St. Louis. Then Don stooped over and looked closely and saw claw-marks faintly revealed in the downward sweep of the step. They were no man marks; a bear had walked that way, on the lookout, no doubt, for an unwary fish that he could paw out of the water.

Don profited by the thought. A sharpened pine branch served him for a spear. He followed up a silver-flashing school of young trout and deftly harpooned a dinner for himself and

Husk. There was a slight thaw through the middle of the day, when the sun came out in a brief moment of belated warmth, but the clouds piled up before long and the slushy surface froze into a crust. Twilight came early, a twilight made lonely by the mournful howling of wolves. Don shivered as he listened to the distant sounds. The cries were plaintive now rather than menacing; he well knew that the cold would soon harden their yelps into cruel snarls and savage threats. Involuntarily his fingers tightened over the grip of his rifle.

A rugged hill, gashed by sliding rocks, loosened by frosts of winter and thaws of spring, promised a sheltered camping ground, and he was glad to throw off his pack and spread out his blankets. The howling wolves sounded nearer, and he gathered an extra supply of firewood, being fortunate in finding a dead birch whose limbs had rotted into breakableness. A monster rock had apparently buried itself in the side of the hill, leaving a shallow pocket on the leeward side. It was here Don built his fire.

After a little thought, instead of making a regulation camp fire he spread it across the narrow opening. Somewhere he had read that

wolves were afraid of fire — and that last weird howl had sounded startlingly close.

“Starvation Camp” Don named the night’s shelter, for their rations were slim to the point of nonexistence. Husk, fortunately, had pounced upon some tiny furry creature that had crossed his path — it had disappeared too quickly for Don to identify it — but the boy had to satisfy himself by worrying some tough bacon rind, thinking longingly the while of the tinned goods Louis had cached for him back there at the camp.

Building up his fire bravely, he at last rolled his blanket about him and, feet to the fire, tried to go to sleep. But Husk, excited by the howling all about him, insisted on trying to rival the loudest of them. Don finally had to get up and drag the dog close beside him. Even then Husk made momentary struggles for freedom of speech, till at last Don lost all patience and scolded him roundly. Then both slept, but Husk, the boy felt sleepily sure, with one ear and one eye open.

It must have been nearly dawn when Don awoke with a terrified sense of something wrong. A dim light from the starry sky enabled him to see about him. He reached over to feel Husk’s shaggy coat, but the dog was not there. More

than that, the hollow in which he had lain was cold. The fire had died to dull embers; Don bestirred himself to heap fuel on its few glowing coals. The fresh wood caught quickly, and ruddy tongues of flame began to leap up and the blaze snapped and crackled cheerfully.

Don stood just within the barrier of flame, listening, conscious somehow of something missing. After a little he realized what it was. He had gone to sleep with the ring of wolf howls in his ears. Now all was still. No—not still either. A kind of uneasy rustling came to him above the crackle of the fire—a scratching, shoving, hard-breathing sort of a stir as of two men who are evenly matched in a wrestling bout. Suddenly it came to him what the noise meant. Perhaps the knowledge was helped along by a deep-throated snarl.

Wolves! Husk! They were fighting!

Don leaped back and caught up his rifle. At the same instant a burly body hurtled through the flames of the camp fire and fell sprawling at Don's feet. It needed no second glance to tell him it was Husk. But Don did not wait to investigate. Without knowing just what to expect he peered intently through the swirling

smoke and leaping flames. That Husk was not badly hurt he soon knew, for the dog came at once and stood beside him, snarling defiance at the unseen foe on the other side the curtain of fire.

Of a sudden the silence out there was rent by a hideous, long-drawn howl. From every quarter, then, it seemed that the cry was taken up, and repeated and magnified. They were besieged by a pack of wolves. Well, at least he had plenty of ammunition, and, better yet, firewood that would last the night through. Still, it was an uncomfortable feeling — that on the other side of that protecting barrier were gleaming eyes — and teeth — watching for the moment of forgetfulness that would mean a successful attack.

A gray form padded stealthily within the area of fire-lighted snow. Don's rifle rang out. A howl, unearthly in its intensity, told that the bullet had not gone astray. Alert, keen-eyed, the boy waited for another chance shot, but it was long in coming. His tired eyes closed for an instant. He had just been intending to fix the fire, he remembered afterwards — one end of the heap had died down to ashes. A watchful four-foot must have been counting on just such

a chance, unaware that another four-foot crouched within, wakeful, jealous of his master's safety.

At any rate, Don came to with a start. That short, sharp yelp had come from Husk—he had disappeared. Don saw the break in the protecting barricade of flame. His eyes followed beyond, where a tangled, writhing heap of snapping jaws, straining limbs, snarling, struggling bodies surged over the ground. One of that deadly pile was faithful Husk.

A blazing inch-through brand lay at his feet, fallen from the fire. He caught up its four-foot length and plunged through the camp fire to the fighting group. Thwack! thump! crack! In the dark he had no way of knowing which he hit, but his blows fell in a perfect tattoo of fury. Less than a minute and it was all over. At the bottom of the pile, shielded by his enemies from the liberating blows, was Husk.

Don carried him back to the other side of the fire. There, in the flickering blaze of the high-flung flames, he tended the dog's wounds as best he could. Poor Husk was a sight. He had enough tears and nips and gashes for a dozen heroes.

“Never mind, old trusty,” consoled Don. “I’ll bet we gave as good as we got. Now you lie down and sleep while I keep watch. You’ve earned your rest.”

So he drew the blankets about him as he sat up against the rock, and made the warmest kind of a nest for the dog under his cocked-up knees. They were disturbed no more that night, which was well, for the belated sun peeped over the low-lying bank of gray mist to see a blood-smeared hairy face, eyes closed in placid slumber, thrust out between the knees of a boy whose chin had dropped onto his chest in the forgetfulness of sleep.

CHAPTER XII

AN ODD MEETING

The next day Don realized that the real fox hunt had begun. The line of footprints, first picked up a mile or so inland, bore directly toward the river. A triple line of deep-sunk marks showed where the fox had paced up and down the bank in indecision. Then a straight trail that cut directly across the river and up over the brow of a rounded bluff, straight into the north. The black fox at last was homeward bound.

His journey would be swift, untiring, Don told himself. No longer would there be three or four stops a day. Undeterred by biting winds or driven snow, the fox would course across the wintry plains, the Barrens, with unerring instinct. It would be foolhardy to attempt to follow; there wasn't one chance in a hundred that the wily fellow would lose in the battle of speed and wits. But opposition only fired Don's blood. Even as

he thought it out he was plunging boldly across the thin ice that bent and cracked under him.

Both he and Husk put on an extra notch of speed, to be rewarded, when the day was nearly spent, by the chance sight of a lone, prowling figure, dark against the slope of a distant hill. It was far out of rifle range, but Don could not resist sending a bullet zinging through the nipping air. Dark found them at the base of the hill, and there they made camp, a camp somewhat cheered by the prospect of a hot supper, for a second bullet from Don's gun had brought down a fat rabbit scurrying through a patch of brush.

That night convinced Don that the snow was no freak, but that winter had come for good. It was clear and crisp, with a cold that nipped bare hands and unprotected ears. Don stretched the rabbit skin out before the fire, tanning it with wood-ashes in a way he had once learned from an old trapper. Worn fur side in, it would be a most welcome addition to his summer weight cap.

The next day was cheerless and gray, the sky overcast with snow-spitting clouds and the wind raw and penetrating. No sight of the

black fox came to them, but a stretch of spindly trees and wild berry thicket rewarded them with pot shots at three more rabbits, two of which Don bagged. While one of these was roasting before the cheery camp fire that night, the boy fashioned himself rude mittens from the pelts — his pocketknife for combined punch and needle and tough membranes for thread. The mitts were a bit unsightly, but his hands were almost bleeding from the cold and exposure, and looks did not count for much up here when weighed against comfort.

His feet were beginning to bother him too, but there seemed no remedy for that. It would take something tougher than rabbit hide to make moccasins, and better tools than he possessed to fashion them. Each night, now, he took off his shoes, rubbing the aching joints with cold snow; that eased them wonderfully. Husk, he noticed, was limping a little too.

The next day the two, boy and dog, redoubled their efforts to overtake the fleeing fox, but to no avail, although Don noted with growing perplexity that the animal's rests by the wayside had recommenced. He puzzled over this circumstance as he walked along, but could arrive at

no solution. Nevertheless, with all the rests, the fox was gaining. By nightfall he was so far ahead that Husk had difficulty in following the trail through the powdery snow that fell and sifted across the bare spaces all the afternoon. A wintry moon was rising as they finished their meal about a handful of fire—there was little timber or brush through this stretch of country—and Don decided to push on at least till midnight.

But the only result was that next morning they overslept, wearied as they were by the extra exertion. They had been making wonderful speed considering the nature of most of the going. Don had developed a sort of dog trot that carried him steadily along at an almost unbelievable rate. And Husk, for all his sore feet, never once asked to abate the pace. Still, this day progress seemed slower and slower. Considerable snow had fallen through the frozen air, powdery snow that lay like so much fine sand. Don's feet slipped under him most exasperatingly, and every unevenness in the trail lost him many a step. Even the sight of a "fox nest," as he had come to call the fugitive's frequent resting places, did not arouse any hopes,

although the last one, melted down almost to the gray earth, indicated a longer stop than usual.

There was only one circumstance that cheered him: Not once in the past three days had they come upon signs of a kill; the fox was traveling without food. Game was scarce; it had been thirty-six hours since Don had seen either feathers or fur or the print of feet save those he followed.

That night Don roasted the remaining half of the last rabbit. Husk looked so fagged that the boy hadn't the heart to propose another night trip, and soon the two lay sleeping soundly before the fire. When Don awoke, the moon was still high, but the coals were dead and the last stick of the sparse supply had burned out. He tossed Husk half of the frozen bit of roast rabbit left, badly burned, it was; the dog bolted it at one gulp. He did not appear eager to take to the trail, which was probably the reason he lost the scent after they had gone less than a mile. As a result they lost a good hour in getting back on the track of the fox, Don really being the one to discover the spot where a betrampled bit of snow and a few bloodspots, noticeably licked beneath the surface of the

snow, indicated a meal — breakfast perhaps — for the black fox.

But the scouting resulted at least in a find whose importance Don did not realize for several days. A shallow valley led them into a wide, flat plain. Across it the snow lay in a dazzling expanse of unbroken white, as smooth as a ballroom floor. It was only when, an hour or so later, the trail of the fox warming up, they came upon another such flat expanse, but this time narrow and stretching in a curving line far to the northward, that Don woke up. Then: "Why, that must have been a big lake," he said wonderingly. "And this is a river big enough to be on the map — if I just had a map," he added regretfully. "As it is, I don't know where I'm at."

The fox had cut across the river, although its easy surface seemed to stretch endlessly into the north. Perhaps it was the broken country on the far side, leading gradually into well-wooded hills, that had enticed him. No doubt he was growing lean from much fasting, and the river route gave no promise of food.

Don was well enough pleased to go into the hills too, for their larder was slim enough in all

conscience. Moreover, among the valleys there would be comparative shelter from the sweep of the icy winds. At noon they stopped beside a clump of rocks that seemed to have been carried down the narrow gorge by some freak freshet, and there Don saw that the fox had made his first kill along the new route. However, the boy was not far behind him. For the first time he had a chance at bigger game than rabbit.

It was a fierce looking animal, nearly as large as Husk, with a squat, powerful body and a face that haunted Don's dreams for days after. It had come unsuspectingly down the gulch as the two rested there beside the rocks, and had showed no great desire to retreat, when Husk, despite Don's low-voiced command, sprang out to attack the intruder. Perhaps the dog thought him one of his own kind. At any rate, Husk's growl was returned in generous good measure and the two waded into each other without any preliminaries. It was a good scrap while it lasted, but Don had no desire to see his companion ripped to pieces by the sharp claws of his adversary, and he ended the fight with a well-directed bullet.

He skinned the animal and then carved his fat

carcass into steaks and roasts. He had an odd feeling of aversion as he did it—it was the first big animal he had ever killed. But the feeling vanished when, a short time later, he ate a prodigal portion of that same juicy meat. It was a bit stringy and strong-flavored, but it certainly reached the right spot. He noticed that Husk felt no compunction in satisfying his appetite on the well-browned relics of his late foe.

The remaining meat, already frozen stiff, made a good load, but the boy was well content to bear it as they continued on up the valley. The hills rose higher and higher about them, and the valleys steeper and rougher. At one particularly high hill Don decided to waste the time necessary to scale it, hoping against hope that a cross-country view from its high peak might save him the winding trip through the lower mazes. But stare across the dazzling white world as he might, no hurrying black spot against the glaring background could he spy, and, disappointed, he turned his face valleyward.

One feature of the landscape did impress itself upon him, however, and he rather wondered at its presence. Away, somewhat to the east but more to the north, a line of blue cut the white;

it could be nothing else but water. At first glance Don decided it must be a lake, still unfrozen because of its size, but closer scrutiny revealed the fact that the line was thread-like, that it stretched far into the northwest and was lost among the hills, but that at no spot did it widen into the semblance of a lake.

However, he had no time for idle speculation, so once more he set his footsteps toward the paw-marks that led on and on into the frozen, barren snow-world.

Night came suddenly, a night of clouds and snow-whorls, of souging winds and uneasy woods sounds. More than one long-drawn howl set the boy shivering and brought the dog to his side with ears pricked up and nose sniffing the wind. But they were not molested, thanks to their fire and the unceasing vigil kept—by Don until midnight, by the dog till daybreak.

Morning dawned with a promise of softening in the air. True, clouds piled high in ponderous masses, but there seemed no menace in them. Tired as they both were, Husk frisked about, catching up mouthfuls of snow in playful puppy style, while Don hummed to himself as he bent over the fire.

"We're off, Husky-busky!" he shouted a half hour later, as, warm and comfortably filled, he caught up his rifle and pack and started through the narrow defile that led into a spacious park-like meadow. Then he paused and rubbed his eyes in unbelief. There was no snow. Brown and indescribably soothing to the eye after many days of white glare, the dead grass carpeted a plain guiltless of snow. Now he understood that unfrozen river or lake or whatever it was. He had come out of the storm area. Here was a spot winter had not yet visited.

Don pictured to himself the joy the black fox must have felt on entering this meadowy oasis in the desert of snow. A pang of sympathy for the hunted brute crossed his heart. It seemed a shame that the poor wild thing should be only a pawn in a game he had no desire to play. It was like running a race with a man who doesn't know you are racing him — only here the stake was life.

But Don was a boy with a horror of the sentimental. The blood of generations of hunters coursed in his veins. After all, life meant no more to that fugitive fox than it had to the quick-leaping rabbits he had brought down with-

out a thought just a few days back—or the chickens that were sacrificed for Sunday dinner all the world over. The big thing was to play fair—and hard.

Moreover, as he stood there staring into the world of living things once more, a sudden glimpse of a moving object against the low-hung hills made him rub his eyes in an attempt to bring the distant animal within their focus. Could it be—he dared not believe that slow-moving speck was a human being. He spent a few precious minutes in a lonesome desire to hear the sound of a human voice besides his own, then with a sigh summoned Husk to take up the trail again. But every little while he found his eyes turning involuntarily toward the hills.

At first the trail cut directly across the prairie, as if the fox too had sighted the open water beyond. But after a little Husk began to sweep back in a wide circle toward where, blue-gray in the distance, a low ridge seemed to merge into the hills farther to the west. Don kept a sharp watch ahead, for he had a feeling that the fox would be inclined to loiter by the way in this pleasant spot. Once or twice, even, he fancied he saw a moving object across the monotone of

grassy plain, but nearer approach revealed only some mound or cluster of prairie weeds.

It was late in the afternoon when they reached the ridge and he found it was really only a succession of low hills blended into one by the distance. Here he found that the fox had abandoned any straightaway flight, but wound in and out among the tiny hills. Don had an uncanny feeling that the long chase was over; that the black fox had come back to his own. That somewhere among the hills was burrow or den or cave to provide a safe refuge — one that old acquaintance made doubly secure.

It was as if the animal were seeking some familiar landmark, for once they completely circled a low, timber-crowned hill; Don stopped abruptly, startled at first by the human footprints in the loose shale that bordered the slope — then he recognized them as his own.

But he was still more startled something like half an hour later. A wide highland, itself only a succession of mound-like hills and shallow valleys, tree and brush covered, lay before him. Across its wind-blown space came an eerie sound — a human laugh, shrill and clear. A rifle shot at his ear could not have been more thrilling to

the lonesome boy. He forgot trail, fox, everything, and hurried in the direction from which the sound had come. But the many hills confused him. Before many minutes he found himself completely lost in the maze of thicket and hollow and midget hills.

He was half minded to shout, but the next instant was glad that he had not obeyed the impulse. Husk had been lagging along behind, apparently glad to be relieved of his responsibilities. Of a sudden, however, he gathered his legs up under him and tore past Don as if mad. As he passed the boy he gave vent to a weird half-howl, half-bark that startled Don nearly out of his wits. The next instant he had disappeared around the next hill, the boy lumbering along after him. He turned the bend just in time to see Husk vanish over the brow of the next rise. Before he could follow, out of a wild-crab thicket that choked the entrance to the little valley below dashed a dusky figure that seemed simply catapulted through the air.

Don had raised his gun in a jiffy, realizing in a flash of joyous excitement that across the sights of his rifle was darting the object of his long chase.

It was the black fox!

A bullet sped along to hasten the flight of the fugitive. It zinged from the surface of a flat rock, inches behind where the fox had been when it struck. Before Don could fire again there was nothing in sight to fire at.

Husk came bounding out of the thicket and raced wildly away in the direction the fox had taken. Don followed as closely as hard-driven human feet could muster. But even then the sounds of the chase died quickly out in the distance, and he steadied his gait to a trot. "Well," he remarked grimly to himself, "at least he knows now we're after him."

Half an hour later he came upon Husk, barking furiously at a cavelike opening in the rocky hillside. It lay on the far side of a six-foot chasm in the bed of a natural quarry, and Husk had not dared the leap. Trembling with excitement himself, Don easily jumped the gap—followed by Husk—and approached the cave. A single glance was enough to tell that there was no hiding room here for a fox. The hole was less than three feet deep, a mere pocket in the cliff.

It looked as if the fox had dropped to the

narrow fissure and so escaped to the free woods below in the next valley. Precious time had been lost, but Don wasted no more in fruitless speculation. It would be folly to try to follow the tortuous crack; he whistled Husk to race him to the bottom of the hill.

But he was saved the trouble of further investigation. A loud crackling in the underbrush on the slope of the next hill was the prelude to a series of wild yelps that Don at first took to be a dog. But soon he realized that odd break in their music was due to an unaccustomed throat. It was a person, not an animal, he realized even before he heard the shout that followed, and then the deep-chested laugh. And then:

“Twice you’ve fooled me, you trap-thief! See if you can dodge this!”

There was the report of a gun, a loud report that woke a hundred echoes. Something seemed to scorch the air as it whined past Don’s cheek. He dropped flat on the ground, almost paralyzed with horror. Could it be that the unseen man — or boy — was shooting at him?

The disappointed exclamation from above did not reassure Don any.

“ Missed! But just you show your ugly face again around my traps and I’ll get you, sure as my name is Claire! ”

“ I say,” shouted Don reassuringly, “ I’m not trying to rob your traps! ”

“ My goodness! ” came the voice from above. “ What in the world is that? ”

“ A friend,” again shouted Don. “ Don’t shoot! ”

“ Well, what in the world—— ” began a pleasant voice wonderingly, then Don looked up to see a young chap about his own age clambering down the steep slope. He dragged an unbelievably heavy muzzle-loader behind him, the end of the barrel in his hand, the stock bumping along behind.

“ I say,” called Don warningly, “ that’s no way to carry a gun. Want to shoot yourself? ”

“ Huh,” laughed the other, half rolling, half jumping down the last twenty-foot bank; “ small danger of blowing yourself to pieces with an unloaded gun. I can’t shoot it but once a day, you know.”

“ No,” ventured Don, taking in the stranger’s outlandish costume, “ no, I can’t say I do.”

“ You would if you had to load it—and

remember just as carefully which went in first, powder or shot, and which kind. It's a loader-at-the-end kind. And even if you do get the right thing in first, the ramrod always sticks and I have to shoot the plaguy cannon into a hillside in order to get it out again. It takes a powerful sight of powder and patience to load that gun."

As far as Don could judge, the frankly smiling youngster wasn't a day over seventeen. He was dressed in furs from top to toe, wonderful furs but ill assorted and poorly fashioned. Needle and thread had been scarce when that suit was made. To be sure, just now the garments looked as if they belonged to the loser in a wrestling match. The hoodlike cap had been knocked awry; the trouser legs were as shapeless and furry as a bear's hind pair, while the coat had very evidently been slept in several nights in succession. Don hazarded a guess that the clothes had been made originally for a larger man.

But the face that went with the comical garb was friendly and alight with mischief and life. Despite the tan on cheek and forehead, the face was very evidently not that of one used to roughing it.

“ Well,” the stranger laughed now, “ how do I size up? ”

Don colored, realizing that he had been frankly staring.

“ Sixteen ounces to the pound! ” he exclaimed heartily. “ My name’s Blackburn —— ” then as the other gave a startled exclamation, but checked himself — “ Don Blackburn. I came up here to —— ”

“ Yes! ” eagerly.

“ What’s the idea? ” blurted Don. The actions of this strange young chap were every moment growing stranger. *He* ought to be the one making explanations. “ I’m hunting,” he finally added.

“ Hunting — what? ” came slowly.

Don was perplexed. Real anxiety seemed to lurk in the eyes of the speaker, anxiety all out of proportion to the trivial question, it seemed to the boy.

“ What? Why, anything — anything there is.”

“ And you say your name is — is Black — is Don Blackburn? ” It was more a wondering statement than a question. Don felt uncomfortable; he was not sure but that he had met up with a lunatic. Perhaps it would be best to humor this odd bird.

“ At least it was my name when I left — left Lac du Chien.”

The other seemed groping for something by which to hold himself erect.

“ Lac —— ” he stammered — “ Don — Black-burn! ”

“ Huh,” grunted Don, all idea of humoring gone, “ you give me a pain.”

Just then Husk came dragging into the open spot where they stood, having been off on a fruitless chase on his own initiative. He made straight for the stranger, stopping a foot or so away and looking up expectantly, his whisking tail begging for recognition.

“ At least your dog thinks I’m all right! ”

“ As far as I can make out,” blurted Don, “ I’m the one who’s an object of suspicion. Is there something the matter with my name, or is it the town I came from — or what? Or what is it that I’m supposed to be hunting that I oughtn’t to be? ”

“ Oh, dear me, you misunderstand —— ”

“ I understood the bullet that whanged past —— ”

“ Did it! ” The other’s eyes went wide with sudden alarm. “ I thought I fired in the

other direction—over toward the bunch of larches——”

“ You were shooting around a corner then; it barely missed my head. I suppose you were shouting that threat at the larches, too!” Don was both sarcastic and suspicious.

The ridiculous figure in the baggy fur suit straightened up sharply.

“ My father’s trap is there by the larches, and a nasty old wolverine has been robbing it every day. Father is sick; I have been running his trap line for him—and have just missed that ugly old thief every time. He just skulked into the bushes yonder before I fired—I could see him behind the brush. It was his mean old face I meant, not yours.”

There was something about this vehement speech that puzzled Don—words, tone, gestures. They had an air of—well, Don hardly knew what it was about the performance that set him wondering.

He strode across the rock-strewn ravine and saw that well-hidden among the trees was an old-fashioned spring trap, sprung but empty.

“ Yes,” nodded the strange fellow, who had followed at Don’s heels, “ he lets something else

spring the trap, then he eats both the game and the bait."

"A wolverine, you say——" began Don, pausing as Husk, his bristles aquiver on neck and back, threw back his head. A prolonged howl, one that Don had come to recognize, cut short the question. Nose to the ground, the dog broke from Don's restraining clutches. He sniffed the trap, the ground about it, then set off through the larches.

"Wolverine nothing!" exclaimed the boy. "That animal you saw was the one I have come all the way from Lac du Chien to capture. That was the black fox!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE HIDE-AWAY

Having said so much, Don felt he might as well make a clean job of it and tell the whole story. His new-found companion listened in growing wonder. When Don finished, there was a short silence. Then:

“ But you did say your name was Don Blackburn, didn’t you? ”

“ Don’t you like it — or what *is* the matter? ”

“ I like it — nothing’s the matter. You see, it’s — it’s — ” but that sentence was never finished. Instead the stranger exclaimed: “ But there is no such thing as a black fox, don’t you know? ”

“ Someone else told me the same thing until they saw it too. You saw it yourself — and fired that cannon at it.”

“ I saw a wolverine. I’ve seen him nearly every day now for a week.”

“ You saw a fox, and this is the first day he’s been in this region. You can’t fool old

Husk. He's followed that scent too many miles not to know it now. That was the fox all right — and I'm mighty glad you missed him. That sixteenth century siege gun would have spoiled his fur — and my whole expedition. By the way — you haven't told me — your —— ” Don hesitated. If the ridiculous fellow didn't want to open up and be friendly, why he didn't have to. Still, it was awkward not to know a chap's name.

“ My name? Oh — I forgot to tell you, I guess. I'm Claire — well, just Claire is enough.”

“ I told you my whole name,” scoffed Don. “ Even if you did act as if — as if you had just seen a reward posted for a dangerous criminal with that handle.”

“ But suppose Claire is all the name I have? It is, in a way.” Then as Don's eyes frankly questioned, the other went on, with a proud lift of the chin: “ My father is a — a hermit, I guess you'd call him. He came into this country years ago, met my mother, married her and then never wanted to go back among his own people. Even after she died, when I was about six, he stayed on here. No one comes here — you are the first white man I have seen in a dozen years. There is no one to call my father by name

— and he never uses it himself. So I am just — Claire! ”

“ Your father must be a queer old —— ” he hesitated, groping for the right word.

There was a sudden flash in the eyes of “ just Claire.” “ My father is the finest man in the world. He stays here for — for my sake. Here I am Claire, free as the birds of the air; back in the cities I would be just —— ” he hesitated, then finished bravely, “ just ‘ That quarter-breed!’ He has taught me — to read, to write, to sing, to play the fiddle, to shoot a gun and catch a fish and paddle a canoe and follow a trail —— ”

“ If you do all the rest as well as you shoot that gun,” commented Don dryly, “ I wouldn’t give much for —— ”

“ You shan’t talk that way about my father! ”

Don laughed good-humoredly. “ All right. But I can’t stand gossiping with you all day. Husk must have circled round behind the hill, and from the way he’s yelping, I think he’s got the fox driven up a tree.”

“ But foxes can’t climb,” objected Claire quite seriously.

“ Maybe you’re right,” grinned Don. “ Will

you walk along, or are you on the back trail to your cabin? ”

“ Both. The trail leads around the hill. You better come up and eat a bite with us after you’ve bagged your fox. Dad’d be glad to see you—he gets pretty lonesome at times, shut up there in that little hut of a place.”

“ How do you find it—the cabin? ”

“ There’s a plain trail. Climb any high hill and sight around till you see the highest hill around; it’s a funny sort of a place—looks as if it had been built up one rock at a time. There’s a river—just a creek, really—about a mile east. If you go straight east from Cobblestone Hill—— ”

“ From what? ” exclaimed Don.

“ Cobblestone—that’s the queer hill I told you about. Straight east of it is a ford. Then you follow the river for something like a mile, till you come to where there’s two hills that stand just opposite each other on each side the river. Leave the river and cut around the hill till you come to a path that leads up. Walk about fifty steps, straight into the air, and knock at the door.”

“ Cobblestone Hill? ” repeated Don. He was

staggered. That was the place Skagway had told him about. That was where all the black foxes were — or near there. No wonder his black fox had streaked for there; it was home. Something of his thoughts must have showed in his face, for Claire said abruptly:

“ You don’t seem to be able to get over old Cobblestone. Ever hear of it before? ”

“ Why, yes — they have ’em in every sizable town — cobblestones, that is. Come on; let’s get a move on us. Husk is acting as if he’d treed a whole tribe of foxes of every color in the rainbow.”

Indeed, Husk was sending out an assortment of yelps and yowls that Don had never suspected were in his vocabulary. They came upon him sooner than they expected. Don gave a gasp of dismay as he realized the cause of the dog’s barking: A seventy-foot cliff rose abruptly from the rock-strewn valley. Perhaps ten feet from the top a narrow path cut into the bluff — a gap of some six feet and then a ledge less than a foot wide led to the summit. Husk leaned out eagerly over the gap. The fox must have led him up the path beginning on the other side of the hill. Desperate, he had leaped the break, and

Husk had not quite had the nerve to follow.

Don called, but the dog, encouraged perhaps by his master's voice, nerved himself to the jump. In horror and suspense the two watchers saw him clear the chasm, tremble on the brink and then draw himself onto the narrow ledge. And then, when it seemed that he was safe, there was a terrific *crack!* and the seemingly solid wall of rock, loosened no doubt when the other part of the ledge had fallen, lurched out and down. With a weird howl that surpassed any previous efforts, Husk was hurtled into the air. He fell, with a thud that turned Don's heart sick, far beyond where the rocks crashed to earth. A mound of earth, topped by a tangled net of wild gooseberry bushes, caught his plunging body.

Don had dashed down the slope and over to where he lay. He was conscious as he ran that his companion did not follow him; he looked back over his shoulder and saw that Claire had sunk in a huddled heap — fainted dead away, Don decided disgustedly.

Husk was still alive, for that much he was thankful. The dog whined gratefully as the boy picked him tenderly from the tangle of bushes and carried him over to a grassy plot. Blood

was streaming from his nostrils, and one leg hung limp. The blood Don dismissed as of no consequence, but the right foreleg was snapped half way up. Poor Husk moaned and Don winced as he snapped the bone back into place—the upper piece had been driven nearly through the flesh. He tore out the lining of his coat, and ripped it into inch-wide strips. Around and around he wrapped the bandage some three layers deep.

He cut a fair sized sapling, and split it into flat sections about six inches long. He took four of these and put them about the leg, once more wrapping the strips of cloth tightly around and around, till sticks and limb were held tightly in place, Husk licking the boy's hands gratefully every time they came within reach.

Husk tried to get to his feet, and did stagger a few steps, but it was no go.

“I guess we'd better carry him to the cabin,” suggested a voice that sounded faint and far away. Don turned and saw that Claire had come up, looking still rather greenish-white about the lips.

“You say you're a hunter?” began Don, grinning to take the sting out of his words, for, for

all Claire's manifest softness, there was something likable about the chap. Then, too, it was Don's dog the other had fainted over. "How far is it?" he asked abruptly.

"It's a long trip, but we could make a kind of sling and carry him between us. Here, I'll cut two poles, and we'll soon have a — stretcher, do you call it?"

He cut off two good-sized poles in a jiffy. Don pulled off his heavy mackinaw, and they thrust the poles through the sleeves. Claire fished a piece of heavy cord from his pocket, and with it they lashed the corners of the coat to the poles. Husk was lifted gently onto the litter, and then, Claire ahead, they picked up the stretcher and started off at a brisk pace.

Two hours or so later they reached the two hills and followed the faint trail around to the path up the hill. Halfway up, a mud-chinked log cabin was built into the hillside.

"I'll go up ahead," suggested Claire, laying his end of the poles on a tree stump, "and tell dad. He — he doesn't always like — strangers."

"Especially if the stranger happens to be named 'Black — Don Blackburn,'" remarked Don, but Claire apparently did not hear.

A moment later Claire returned. "Come ahead," he urged. "Better take Husk inside, where dad can reach him. He's a wonderful hand at curing things, dad is."

He was a wonderful hand at many things, that "dad" was. Don had expected an uncouth trapper; he found a gentleman, hairy and just now rather unkempt, it is true, but courteous and fair-spoken. He welcomed Don warmly, and gave Husk a pat on the head that won that poor cripple's life friendship. Claire's father — there was no introduction beyond that one: "Father, this is Don" — lay on a rude bunk-bed built against the wall. Husk was gently deposited beside him on the bear-skin cover, and there he remained for many a long day, watched and cared for by the sick man.

The cabin was roomier than at first appeared. There were two rooms, besides the tiny built-on kitchen and the storeroom back in the hillside. Another bunk was built into the room where Claire's father lay, but Claire himself apparently slept in the little room just behind. Don wondered a little at this arrangement, but the mystery was soon explained. Claire had disappeared into the little back room, going directly from

there to the tiny kitchen, from which interesting sounds soon began to issue. "Guess I'd better hike on back there and help with the eats," suggested Don, when a sudden exclamation from that region indicated some domestic catastrophe.

"Chase along," agreed the man, smiling a bit mysteriously.

Don wondered, but went through the bear-skin curtained door. He backed through again hastily. It was not Claire who was making the clatter and the smoke there in the crude but neat kitchen. It was a woman — a girl, Don's hurried glance told him.

A hearty laugh from the man on the bed showed that he had been expecting Don's precipitate retreat. "Go on in," he urged. "She won't bite."

So Don went back. At his second entrance the girl turned from the so-called stove — and Don almost fled once more. A decidedly pretty girl, her face flushed from her exertions with the fire — or was that what made her cheeks so red, and her eyes so twinkly? Then Don's jaw dropped. "Well, I'll be — switched!" he exclaimed. "Is it — is it Claire?"

It was Claire. But it was a decidedly different

Claire from the one who had worn the bewrinkled coat and the baggy trousers. In fact, she looked trim and neat and altogether "back-homy" to Don. Now he understood the soft look to her, and the ignorance of gun and game and trail; he knew why Claire had fainted.

"Huh!" he remarked enthusiastically. "You make a sight better girl than you did boy!"

"Thank you," she said, blushing a little. "Dad thinks so too. Now you chase back to him and talk hunting and other man things with him. I don't need any help with the cooking; and you've given me enough blarney for one day."

Don went back and soon was deep in a lively conversation with Claire's father. The man was well versed in game lore. It seemed as if he had hunted every sort of game on the American continent. He talked well; it was easy to see where Claire had got her correct speech. For the most part, Don listened. Only once did he try to direct the conversation, and then he soon realized that he was treading on forbidden ground. It came after the man had told an interesting story of deer hunting in upper Michigan.

"What I can't understand," began Don, "is

why you've buried yourself up here in the Barrens. Why, a man like you ought to be able to —— ”

“ There are many things,” interrupted Claire's father gravely, “ that it's just as well not to understand. I have my reasons — they satisfy me.”

For a moment there was an awkward silence, broken, fortunately, by Claire's announcement that supper was ready as soon as she could set it on the table. Don sprang to help her — a shelf let down from the wall supplied the table — and when the man had dragged himself out of bed, groaning most dismally but refusing all offers of help, they sat down to a merry meal.

“ How long do you suppose it will be till poor old Husk can use his wooden leg? ” inquired Don after a while.

“ How old is he? A year? ”

“ I don't know. Not any more than that, I guess.”

“ Bone ought to knit pretty well in a couple weeks then.”

“ And in the meanwhile,” said Don mournfully, “ my fox will be far along on his merry way.”

"Don't think so," disagreed the man. "I think your fox will hole in right around here for the winter. But what's the idea? Is this some special fox you're after?"

"You better bet it is! It's a *black* fox." Don paused to let the statement sink in, but the other made no sign, so he went on: "His pelt's worth a heap o' money."

And then he told the whole story of his hunt, for the two, man and girl, were friendly, sympathetic folk and somehow gave him a feeling of being at home. "So," he concluded, "you see I've just got to catch him."

"A thousand dollars!" exclaimed the man, as if aroused from a dream. "You said a thousand, didn't you?"

"That's what Skags said he'd give to get him back."

"Who is this Skags?"

"Skagway is his real name." Don noted a look that passed between father and daughter but he pretended not to see. "He works out of Lac du Chien—I met him afterwards out in the woods while I was trailing the fox, and he——" suddenly suspicions that had been hazy became clear-cut to the boy; before he realized what he

was saying he had blurted out: "And he told me about — you!"

It had not been in his mind to say anything of the sort. Old Skagway's story had seemed to fit — the big lake, the river, the "cobblestone" mountain, the hide-away himself. Now that he summed them all up, in the tense pause that followed his statement, he felt sure of himself, even before he had heard the man's sudden:

"What's that you say? Sim Skagway told you about me?"

"Did I say *Sim* Skagway?" asked Don innocently. "Why, yes, he told me about you —" He paused, for the man had risen in quick anger.

"To tell you — *you* of all people! I'd wring his talebearing old neck, the old gossip. So now you know I'm your —"

"Sh — dad!" cried Claire. "He doesn't mean *that*, I'm sure. He never *would*, dad."

"Oh," Don hastened to reassure, "he didn't tell anything you'd object to, I know. He was telling me the story of how he captured that fox, and told me something about where you lived, and that — that kind of thing, you know. And — Oh, yes, he told me how he saved your life one time, and that he couldn't find you and

the cabin here on the hill. But that was all."

"Huh," grunted the man. "It'd better be all, if Skags values his hide. As for your black fox, that man lied to you about it—and about me, too."

"But he spoke very nicely about you, sir."

"But he lied, just the same. I *gave* him that fox. He didn't tell you that, did he? He didn't tell you that I showed him the way out of this neck o' the woods at the end of my rifle, did he? He didn't tell you that he's the reason I'm here unable to stir out of my cabin. I'll bet he didn't tell that."

"No-o, he didn't."

"He'll never show his face around here, I know that much. As for you—and the dog—you're welcome to stay here as long as you choose. Don't worry about your black fox. Old Skagway will never have a thousand dollars to pay you for that pelt. Nor anyone else. Help me over to my bed."

Don lifted the man in his sturdy young arms, and carried his wasted frame easily to the bunk. Claire had gone into the kitchen.

"Old Skagway," said the man hastily, "was playing those villagers back there for a set o'

goops. Do you think he'd brought that fox back alive if it had been worth a thousand dollars."

"Three thousand, he said."

The man only grunted. "Do you think I'd have given him a pelt worth three thousand dollars?"

Don said nothing. Somehow, he still had faith in what Skagway had told him. How was this man, who probably hadn't talked with a white man in years, to know about the value of black fox skins? Skagway had said the man didn't know.

"There's a good reason——" the invalid began again, but Claire entered the room just then, and the sentence remained uncompleted. She turned eagerly to Don.

"You may be able to track your fox without a dog," she said. "It's snowing hard. He won't get far in this storm, and he'll leave a plain eye-trail for you to follow when he does venture out."

"Daughter, you remember the place I took you last summer, the time old Skagway—never mind that. The place where we caught the big trout and you fell in and nearly drowned. Well, you recall the route we followed coming

back — where the deer-run led through the hills, and all those ravines there. You show Don how to get there to-morrow. Tell him so he can reach that one big hill I showed you, where the big bear pretty near got me. Can you do that? ”

“ Oh, yes.”

“ Good. And you, youngster,” turning to Don, “ you follow the trail she shows you. And when you come to that hill you climb it. Look to the north. There’s a long low ridge, bare as a Chinaman’s chin. On the far side of it — that’s north, you know — you’ll find the slope cut into a thousand gullies and basins. Just which it is I can’t tell you from here. But there’s a few trees at the bottom, one big old tamarack, I remember. And there’s a — a sort of cave close in. That’s the place where that fox came from. I trapped it myself; I ought to know. And if you know foxes as well as I do, you know that a fox, black or blue or what color, is going back *home*.”

CHAPTER XIV

THE SECRET OF THE BLACK FOX

But Don's trip to the valley next morning proved to be one of the most disappointing expeditions he had ever undertaken. He left early — it was barely daylight and Claire and her father still slept. He found a piece of cold meat in the kitchen, and thus fortified, he stopped to give Husk a farewell pat on the head and then hustled out, followed by the faithful dog's reproachful eyes. It was bitter cold, and Don surmised that this favored spot would not much longer escape the blasts of winter. Claire's snowstorm had not materialized, but now a stinging pellet or two of sleet made the prediction more than a mere guess.

The route as outlined by Claire's father was easy to follow, especially as Claire had pointed out the hill in a rough map she drew for him. He whistled gayly as he strode along over the wind-rusted grass. There was a river he was supposed to strike by cutting due northwest,

and he was to follow the line of that to where the stream entered the hills again. After that, he had only to identify his hill. The river proved to be farther away than he had figured, and it was well along in the middle of the forenoon before he reached its bank. Prairie seemed to stretch out endlessly ahead of him, but after a mile or so the narrow waterway quartered off and he found the bluish line that he had thought to be trees was really a clump of low hills. Among them there was one that seemed to be an inch or two higher than the rest. Don puffed his way to the top.

Sure enough, to the north he saw another blue-gray roll in the prairie. He ran down the hillside and in another hour had covered the distance to the easy slope. It was, as the man had said, "as bare as a Chinaman's chin." But if the southern slope was gentle, the other side was far from it. Gashed by a thousand tiny ravines, a sort of land-flood that had left behind giant rocks and warty mounds and stranded islands, it looked like one side of the crater of a volcano. Don despaired at finding the basin that had been described to him. Every one seemed to have the clump of trees, and a lone tamarack was a rather

dubious mark of identity. However, he plodded along the ridge in dogged determination. As the man said, when told that prospecting for gold was attended by many difficulties — “I’m not looking for ’em; I’m lookin’ for gold.” Don was looking for a fox.

And he found it.

He must have gone as far as two miles, when above the brow of the next saw-tooth ridge he saw a tufted tree towering high above even the stunted pines that topped the ridge itself. One glance told him that the ravine in which the tree stood was wide enough to be called a basin — even before he saw the clump of over-grown rocks that he felt sure was the site of the cave. And then the boy’s heart almost stopped beating, to begin pounding again with a speed that set every muscle atremble.

Out into the open stalked the black fox.

Before Don’s unbelieving eyes the figure he had followed these many weary miles, came stiff-legged, as if just stretching himself out of sleep, apparently emerging from the very ground. And Don, whose fingers had itched these many days to pull trigger, did not so much as raise his rifle to his shoulder. It was an easy shot — barely a

hundred yards — but there was something that held him back. An impulse — chivalry, true sportsmanship — restrained him for the instant. A half sob rose to his throat.

Now Don understood those frequent rests along the trail; he understood why he and Husk, moving so slowly after all, had been able to keep up with the speediest of all four-footed wild things. The animal stepping so slowly out from its refuge was a mother fox. She had been dragging herself across the wide, weary miles so that her brood might be born in the home country, that she might fend for them, protect them, with an even chance against her foes. Don had lived his life where there could be little prudishness; he knew that the black fox had reached her hiding place but little before her time.

Don gulped hard. Within his grasp — almost — had been the price of his vindication. He *had* made good, so he told himself, and yet he could not bring back his prize. “And how they would laugh at me, those grocery store loafers, if they knew!” he said aloud. “How they would snort over my — my babyish soft-headedness. And I expect they’d be dead right.”

But way down deep in his heart Don knew that only one thing was right: The black fox was making the supreme sacrifice. She must be secure in her motherhood.

Still—the miles were slow ones on the way back to the cabin. High hopes die hard. A boy's hopes die hardest of all. Day by day these hopes had mounted, as the difficulties mounted. Night by night his courage had flagged, to be revived as morning roused him with new demands on endurance and resourcefulness.

What should he tell Claire's father, rough man of the frontier as he was? There would be no womanish squeamishness about him, Don well knew. And what *could* he tell Claire?

It was easier than he thought. Dark had come upon him before the cheerful gleam of a light in the one window of the cabin guided his tired footsteps. Claire opened the door for him. "What luck," she asked, but with an encouraging lift in her voice that told she already knew the answer.

"No fox," he answered simply.

Claire bustled out into the kitchen to warm the hungry boy a snack. Don was grateful for her withdrawal; it would give him a chance to

tell her father, for he had no idea of withholding the truth.

“ Well, I saw the fox,” he began glumly. “ I didn — I couldn’t shoot — *her*.”

“ Yes —— ” the man spoke very softly. There was a look in his eyes that made the boy warm to him with sudden increase of liking. “ Yes, I wanted to tell you last night. You see, I *knew*. I gave her to Skagway, you know. And of course I knew her sex. *He* thought I didn’t know the value of a black fox skin — the old crook. I know you’re terribly disappointed — you needn’t be. I had that fox in my hands. Why, I raised it on the bottle, you might say — the mother was caught in one of my traps, and I had to kill her to put her out of her misery.”

“ And her pelt —— ” began the boy eagerly.

The man shook his head. “ Son,” he said, “ there’s something Skagway didn’t know — that you don’t know either — about black foxes. You know what an albino is? ”

Don nodded. “ I’ve seen one in a sideshow.”

“ Well, a black fox is just the reverse. Yes,” as the boy looked puzzled, “ there is no such breed of fox. It’s a color freak. The mother of that poor little vixen was a red fox, an Alaska

red fox, as common up here as sand fleas in Lac du Chien. Oh, I've been there," he laughed as the boy looked up in inquiry. "Perhaps you wonder, since I told you I raised your black fox, why I gave her to Skagway, liking the fox and not liking the man over well. That fox was a pet, a household playfellow till she was nearly a year old. Then the call of the wild was too strong. She disappeared. That is, she was away through the days. But nights—well, Brindle, as we called her, was the shrewdest little thief that ever wore fur or feather. Nothing in the way of eats was safe. We couldn't keep her out. And I hadn't the heart to kill her. Skagway once saved my life, and he asked me for the little pest. Our relations were a bit strained at the last, and so I gave him Brindle."

"But why did you—did you call her——"

"Brindle? Another reason your disappointment need not be so deep. She was. She was brindle. At a distance her fur looks black enough. The long outer hairs, the coarse ones, are black as midnight's lashes. But those hairs come out when the fur is dressed for market. Underneath she was a rich, tawny brown."

"And I tramped up here for nothing!"

“Not for nothing. Did you ever read the story of ‘Sir Launfal’? Lowell tells it. He went after the Holy Grail. And he found it — if I remember right — where it had always been: in his own heart. Strikes me you came up here looking for something bigger than a pelt. You were looking for yourself. I’ve a notion you found it out there where your finger slipped off the trigger when you learned that you couldn’t shoot a poor little forest mother even for the prize of a purse of gold.”

“And I thought that you would laugh at me,” blurted the boy.

“Then we were both wrong, for I thought that you wouldn’t tell me.” And Don realized that he was strangely happy that he had.

Claire came in just then. Her father raised himself on one elbow and remarked quietly:

“Claire, Don just told me that what I said to you last night was true. He is a true — sportsman.”

The girl looked at Don with shining eyes. As directly as boy to boy, she reached out her strong hand to him and said simply:

“I’m so glad — for her sake and yours. Dad and I are proud of you.”

That was all. Claire went back into the kitchen, whence soon she brought a heartening supper in place of the snack she had promised. The three of them chattered as Don ate, Husk wagging interested messages with his tail. He had become resigned to his enforced idleness, thanks to his new-found friend who was also bedfast.

Indeed, next day found all of them close confined to the cabin, for a blizzard raged that whitened over the landscape and piled a great bank of snow against the door as the wind eddied blinding drifts around the hill. For two days the storm lasted, and into the next night. Then came cold, such penetrating, blood-thickening chill as Don had never before experienced. The morning of the third day dawned clear and sharp. By noon a southerly breeze had sprung up. By sunset the low roof was dripping. But the wind had piled great banks of clouds over the sky and next morning dawned gray and cheerless, with no indications of a thaw. "If I just had snowshoes," began Don, to be interrupted by a gay laugh from Claire.

"Look up over your head," she advised. "The biggest pair is mine. You can borrow

dad's. What would you do now," she teased, "if you had snowshoes?"

"Run the trap line, if I had a fellow along who knew where they were — and wasn't afraid of the cold."

"Put on your earmuffs and your rabbit-hides. I'll just race you to the first one."

At first Claire's father was reluctant to let them go, but they were so enthusiastic that it would have taken a hard heart to have denied them. So he finally shooed them out of doors, laughing as gayly as the two youngsters.

But Don was well content to call the race off before half the distance to the first trap had been covered. "Guess you must have been born with snowshoes strapped to your feet," he praised generously.

"Dad taught me," she said modestly. "He's the best in the North Country. To see us two together you'd think I was going backwards."

"Huh," grunted Don skeptically. "There ain't no such animal."

But their trip was fruitless. The traps were all snowed in and not even a prowling wolf had clawed his way through the two feet of snow that lay above the bait. Where traps had been

set in watercourses or other well-marked trails, the drifts had piled the banks level. A stiff wind caught them on the way back, and so, although they reached the cabin shortly after noon, they were not tempted to visit the northern line of traps.

Next morning Claire's father failed to respond with his usual cheery answer when she called in that breakfast would soon be ready. He managed to rouse himself and eat a bite or two propped up in bed; Don knew that he must be suffering, for when he could not limp his way to the table, the boy and Claire had always helped him over between them. After the dishes were cleared away Don went in to see if the invalid had dropped back to sleep. He found him staring up at the ceiling, his face contorted with pain. "Guess I'm in for one of my bad spells. We must be going to have a taste of weather. Ask Claire to come in—I'm afraid she'll have to rub me with that 'thousand stinging needles' liniment, though I can't see that it does me a particle of good."

The pains did not yield to Claire's deft treatment; in fact the agony grew more and more intense. The two had planned to visit the other

traps this morning, as the day seemed pleasant enough, but now Claire announced that she would have to remain with her father.

“ Why can’t I go? ” asked Don. “ Can’t you give me directions for finding the traps? ”

“ Oh, you can find them all right—but I wanted to go along,” exclaimed Claire ruefully. “ The traps to the north are always the ones where we get our best furs. And dad had promised me I could have all the otter pelts I brought in for a fur coat.”

“ Never mind; I’ll bring you home two of them. Where do I go? ”

“ Well, dad made me a chart, from memory, but it was accurate enough for me to find them, so I guess you can too. When his rheumatism got so bad, I had to go out for him, and I had never visited all the spots with him, so he made me that rough draft as a guide. Just a minute and I’ll get it for you.”

“ No hurry.”

“ Oh, but there is. It’s a good day’s job, I *know*.” She brought him a folded bit of paper and then, through the cabin door, pointed out the route for him. With a gay laugh of reassurance at her solemn warnings, he was off.

It was as she had said. The traps were easy to find, or, rather the locations were. For the most part the traps themselves lay buried deep under drifts of well-packed snow. For a while it looked as if they all would be as unsprung as they had been on the south line, but in a sheltered glen he found the jaws of the ponderous steel spring trap had closed over the foreleg of an animal he guessed to be a wolverine. Even in death its ferocious face was repulsive and fear inspiring. It was a powerful looking brute, compactly built, coarse furred; its death struggles had almost torn the heavy steel chain from its anchorage. He carried the carcass to the brow of the next hill and made shift to lift it out of the reach of wolves, in the branches of a spruce. Then he went on his way.

Finally he reached the ridge where he had found the home of the black fox. The last trap was several ravines beyond the basin where he had seen that little mother come out to make its mute appeal to his sympathies. He decided to go on past, make sure the final trap had not been sprung, and then come back along the base of the slope to warm up, for a keen wind had sprung up. But as he passed the head of the gully, with

its telltale tall trees, out of the corner of his eye he caught the flash of a moving bit of color. He whirled quickly, but the object had disappeared.

He was about to go on, when, in the shelter of a dark rock cropping out of the snow, he saw the tip of a furry something that he knew must be the animal that had darted to cover so hastily. He decided to stop awhile, to rest and perhaps to catch another glimpse of the quarry he had traveled so far to capture. So intent was he upon the fleck of dark beyond the rock that he did not at first see another moving object, that came stealthily across the snowy basin.

When Don did see it, he rubbed his eyes in astonishment. Was he seeing double? It was the black fox—Brindle! A line of footprints led unquestionably from the overhanging rock where a vague shadow showed the mouth of the home cave. Then what was that other skulking creature behind the rock? Another fox—or what?

Don decided to find out. As he cut cautiously across onto the ridge of the abruptly sloping hill that provided the only safe passage to the basin below, he heard a low snarl, of a sort he had heard once before. Then came a sharp bark, of

pain or defiance, he could not tell which. Fired with excitement, he put on more and more speed. He was out of sight of the valley, but the fierce, struggling sounds from beneath told of deadly conflict. He would have to hurry.

But his desire for speed proved fatal. The rounded point of his snowshoe caught under a root that lay barely hidden by the thin crust of snow. A wrench, a twist, and he sprawled over the edge and the next instant went hurtling through the air, over the rock-strewn precipice, to land with a jolt that jarred all presence of mind out of him. His rifle had gone skyrocketing and now fell, barrel down, in the snow a dozen feet away. As for the boy himself, he barely escaped dashing his brains out against the giant tree that had been his landmark in finding the place. He pulled himself to his feet, conscious as he did so of a keen stab of pain that shot up his left leg. The ankle was wrenched, and badly.

But the sight that met his eyes as he looked from the mound where he stood, into the narrow valley, took away all thought of his own pain.

It was such a battle as one may see but seldom. A wolverine, bigger and more ferocious looking

even than that one he had cached back there in the spruce, had attacked the black fox. She looked a pigmy beside her more powerful antagonist, but she was giving a good account of herself. Already the trampled snow about them was crimsoned with jets of blood that spurted from both. Just now the fox had a punishing throat hold on her burly foe but was being dragged about in an effort to loosen her locked jaws.

A fierce yelping, from which, Don could not tell, as the two rolled over and over in the snow, and then they stood apart, keenly alert for an opening. A flash of dusky fur, and two desperate bodies pelted at each other, but neither found teeth-holds. A brief interval of snarling defiance and once more they closed in. The struggle was furious, but no advantage was gained. The fox was the quicker, but her strength was puny in comparison. Time after time now, in the mortal onset, she found holds but was as quickly shaken loose. Her teeth gashed through thick fur and tough hide, but the wounds were mere scratches.

Gradually her rushes lost their dash; she was being slowly *overborne* by the sheer weight of her foe. There was a sudden wild scream of pain, a crunching, horrible sound, and Don saw

that jaw was locked in jaw, but the wolverine had the upper hold.

The boy had been standing as if chained to the spot, fascinated by the stirring spectacle. Now he started forward to interfere, even forgetting his gun in his haste. But his leap ended in a tumbled heap. His twisted ankle had given way under him.

In an agony of mingled pity and admiration he lay there, sickened with the pain in his foot, watching the game fight put up by the Black Fox. It was all over soon enough. That crunching sound had been the deathknell of the fox's hopes of victory. Her jaw was broken. But she fought pluckily on.

Up there in the snowbank stood Don's rifle, only a dozen feet away, but every foot of that way an icy, slippery twelve inches of torture.

A final desperate cry from the fox nerved him to put his weight on the wracked ligaments for one agonized instant. A hopping, lurching plunge, and his fingers barely reached the barrel of his rifle. He held to it, lying face down there on the slope, then slowly drew the gun toward him, fearful that he might lose his balance and go rolling to the bottom.

He managed to regain level ground and then turned.

A sob burst from his throat.

It was too late. The fight was over. Dripping blood from a hundred wounds, the victor gave one final snap of his wicked jaws, a last jerk of his hideous head. A limp, lifeless mother fox sagged down into the sorry-looking snow. The trail of the black fox was at an end.

Incensed beyond expression, Don raised his rifle. Despite the fact that the barrel might well be clogged with snow, that the gun might burst under the strain if the bullet could not force its way through—he took hasty aim and fired.

True to its mark the leaden pellet sped, and with a lurch, over the body of the vanquished sank the victor in a fruitless triumph. The black fox was avenged.

A moist-eyed boy dug a shallow grave close to the rocky ravine wall. Over it he piled a huge cairn of rocks and stones, and then, his wrenched ankle bound so tight that the very pain of the bandage killed all feeling from the sprain, Don began the long, weary, awkward journey to the cabin.

CHAPTER XV

A DOUBTFUL RESCUE

Don never knew how he made the last few miles of his journey to the cabin. The pain in his ankle had long since vanished in a torture-shot numbness. Darkness came on him, a cloudy, starless darkness, and he had only instinct for a guide. It seemed that he had been stumbling along, tripping over his snowshoes every few steps, for days instead of hours. A light appeared and seemed to dance before him. At first he thought it was a lantern, but after awhile, when he stood still and looked at it, he gradually realized that it was the cabin's lone window.

The next thing he knew he was inside, conscious of a cheery warmth and light, and the sound of a human voice. And then he was sitting at the table, and someone was saying:

“Poor boy, you must have been almost starved!”

“Have I been eating?” laughed Don, coming to himself with a start.

“Eating? No, stuffing yourself.”

“I was sound asleep,” he chuckled. “Now that I’m awake, I’m ready for a real meal.” But Claire playfully pushed him away from the table.

“Not another bite,” she said, “or you’ll founder yourself. If that’s what you eat when you’re asleep, I shudder to think what you’d do to a square meal when you’re awake. Traps all empty, were they?”

“All but one — a wolverine in it. I hung him up in a tree. I couldn’t carry him back, you know.”

“Couldn’t? Why not?”

“Why, my ankle!”

For the first time Claire noticed the bulky bandage about the boy’s foot. “Let’s see it,” she commanded. “What did you do to it?”

Don told the whole story, while Claire cut away the strips and prepared to bathe the swollen joint with the powerful liniment they used for her father’s rheumatism. A thousand needles seemed to shoot through the flesh the minute the pressure of the bandage was removed, but the

liniment brought quick relief. In fact, Don decided that it could not have been so much of a strain after all, as he was able to limp about on it in short order. Nevertheless, Claire insisted on his going to bed, and threatened all kinds of dire penalties if he dared set his foot to the floor before she gave permission.

It was late, and she soon said goodnight to the two. Don was soon dozing, but was awakened by hearing his name called.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I didn't want to waken you if you had dropped off. I heard what you told Claire about your black fox. You didn't say anything about the ——" he hesitated.

"The wolverine? It was a wolverine that attacked her. I shot it!" savagely.

"I didn't mean — that. Were there any baby foxes — or hadn't they been born?"

Don's jaw dropped. "I — I never thought of it. They must have been."

"Must have," agreed the man. "The mother fox would not have fought except to protect her young."

"And I came away and left those poor things there to die of hunger or to freeze to death in

that hole!" exclaimed the boy in contempt for his thoughtlessness. "The pain in my ankle just took the tuck out of me—I'm a great one!"

"Well, they won't last long without their mother."

Neither one said anything further, and soon both were sound asleep.

Next morning a soft south wind sprang up, so warm that the cabin door was left open part of the day. Don's ankle felt so much better that he wanted to get out of bed and walk around, but Claire insisted on at least a day's rest for it. Her father was feeling better too, and unassisted he got out of bed and roamed about the cabin. After a bit he disappeared into the storeroom, where he busied himself sorting out his furs, his cheery whistle sounding out every now and then as he worked.

Claire drew a chair close beside Don's bunk, and the two talked together in low tones. "That's the way he always is when he's feeling well," Claire was saying; "always whistling and singing and cracking jokes. He hasn't touched his fiddle in months—not since this rheumatism struck him. Just see if he doesn't come in after a bit and tune up."

“ And doesn’t he ever go to town — ” then as Claire looked blank — “ the trading post, I mean. Surely you two haven’t lived away off here alone always.”

“ Always,” answered Claire. “ Always, and alone since — my mother left us.”

“ Is that why he — ” Don hesitated, not knowing just how to word his question. “ Doesn’t he ever talk of going back? To people and — and things? ” he added. “ It must get mighty lonesome here for you. No girls — or fellows,” he said teasingly. “ And there’s no school and things like that.”

“ He has taught me himself,” Claire replied. “ Every time he takes in his furs, in the spring, he brings back a great load of books. We read them all together and talk them over. Dad says I needn’t be ashamed anywhere of my education.”

“ You talk better than I do,” agreed Don. “ But there’s lots of things besides that. Even one teacher in a school couldn’t teach you everything you ought to know — especially if he’s a man. Things like sewing, and — a — cooking.”

“ But my mother taught me that. She tried to teach me to sew, but I couldn’t learn, it seemed like. It *does* get lonesome here though. You are

the only white person who has been here since old Skagway came. He wanted my father to go back — that was why they quarreled, I think.”

“Do you suppose it’s something he might have done, back there — I mean — well, a man doesn’t bury himself away from his kind just as a whim.” This last was said defensively, for Don realized that he had no right to harbor suspicion against his host.

The color flamed in the girl’s face, but she was silent. It was as if Don had merely voiced a thought that had come to her many times — that, at least, was Don’s interpretation. Then she began speaking, and her low, rich voice had a pleading note in it that thrilled the youngster beside her.

“Don, I can’t blame you for thinking that. But it isn’t true. I’m going to tell you why my father stays here, buried alive in these snow-drifts, hiding his talent, when he might be a successful man among men. I hoped you would go back to that world without knowing; that world that my eager, unreckoning heart cries out to mingle with. Because *I* am the reason.”

Don looked at her searchingly, trying to fathom the meaning of her statement. The rich color

came to her cheeks and forehead, and her eyes shone with unshed tears.

"I am the reason," she repeated. "I ——" then defiantly — "I am not white!"

Don whistled softly, then. "Get out!"

"My mother was the child of a French courier de bois and a Cree *squaw*!" She emphasized the word. "The tribe moved on, and my grandmother went with it, leaving my mother with her roving father. She grew up in his kind of world — hunting cabins, logging camps, the woods, the river, the unending trail. She was dark, but it was the dark of outdoor life. Straight and tall and supple as a sapling was my mother. My father met her in a logging camp, where he knew her only as the daughter of Francois Fortier. I think he loved her even then. Later, when he had been abandoned by the very comrades he tried to save from starvation and the cold of our terrible winters, she saved his life. They made the long trip back to the Post together, and he asked her to marry him. She told him of her mother. He was a man with strong pride of race, but, ah, he loved her.

"They were married. I was born. My mother died. Now, you understand?"

"But nobody'd know that you were a — that you weren't — hang it all, Claire, you're just as white as I am."

"But don't you see — father is morbid, sensitive. He has lived much alone. He loves me, better than all the world. He is afraid I would not be happy. Afraid that world of yours, the bright, happy, *white* world, would not accept me. Down in his heart he feels that his people would censure him — a white man, the pride of his race, mated with a squaw of the aborigines — and despise me."

"Morbid is right. Claire, he's just plain lost his nerve. Why, nobody'd be the wiser, in the first place, and your dad, if he had the right pep left in him, would soon make them toe the mark if anybody started any of that pride of race stuff. Let me ask him if he won't."

"Not a word, Don. He'd never forgive me for telling you. And I'd rather die than let him know that I wasn't satisfied."

Her father came in just then. Going directly to where on a forked peg driven in the wall there hung a scarred and much-mended violin, he took it down and began twisting the pegs. "My bow, Claire," he said, twanging his thumb

across the strings. "And bring me that lump of rosin from behind the teapot on the shelf."

Now Don had once taken violin lessons himself. He had got so far as simple exercises, and could play by ear any tune he knew well enough to whistle. Moreover, he loved music and was familiar with much of the best. The Frantzens back home had a piano, and Alice's uncle in Toronto sent her books with the simpler classics.

But the man who drew his warped and almost hairless bow across that battered violin played such music as Don had never heard before. It was as the boy imagined Paganini must have played, with a fire and an abandon that marked him as a master of his instrument. For an hour or more he played.

"And you stay up here in the Barrens!" exclaimed the boy when the man took the violin from under his chin.

The man only smiled. He tucked the instrument back under his chin. He played the old familiar songs, now, the ones in the song book at home; and those Don had often heard his mother hum. In fact Don caught himself humming them now. Then, as the man dropped into a sort of minor, he began to talk.

“ Yes, Don, I stay up here — in the Barrens. I studied under Warneck, and he was a master in his day. I have played at nearly every logging camp in the Northwest, on both sides the line. I have hunted and trapped from Hudson’s Bay to Wisconsin and Michigan. My name is known wherever men talk together of the things strong-blooded men do. If I told you what my name — ” he paused, abruptly. “ It is a name that never held a stain. It never shall, for no one shall know it belongs to the worthless, feeble-spirited fiddler of the Barrens. To the world that knew me I have died. It is better so. Only one man knows — ”

“ Skagway! ” whispered the boy eagerly.

The man nodded, but as if his thoughts were far away. “ He will never tell, for it is his shame as well as mine. Enough — let’s eat.”

“ But won’t you let me — ”

“ Son, you are the only one I have ever opened my heart to in this way. I trust you. I have fought out my battle many times. I have *won* it. There is no other way but the one I have chosen.”

“ But surely,” the boy’s voice was shrill, for he was daring much, “ surely you are not willing to be a — *quitter*! ”

The man nodded. "A quitter, the world of strangers would call me. But not enough of a quitter, praise be, to carry on the fight through the heart of my womenfolk — my girl. I couldn't be that much of a coward, Don."

"Not even, dad, if ——" began Claire, her face flaming, then softening wonderfully as her father interrupted gently:

"Don't make it harder for me, little pal."

The dinner was a subdued meal. Through the long afternoon and evening that followed, a curious restraint seemed to settle over them. Don went to sleep quickly, revolving in his mind a scheme for the morrow.

Long before daylight he was up, delighted to find that his ankle gave him no pain and that the stiffness was all gone. He found a scrap of paper and a pencil. Hastily scribbling off a brief note, he laid it where Claire would find it first thing.

"Folks: I'm off to bring in the baby foxes. Your father will understand."

A sudden impulse impelled him to scrawl his signature at the bottom. Then to the "Don" he added: "Don Blackburn, the *second*."

He ransacked the "pantry" for a hasty break-

fast, and stuffed a snack in his pocket, then, rifle under one arm and snowshoes under the other, he softly opened the cabin door and stepped out into the crisp snow.

As Don pressed steadily forward into the gray-ing morning light he had a growing feeling of coming disaster. There was a heavy feeling in the air that told of a storm on the way. Not a breath of wind stirred, but a raw dampness seemed to clog his very breath. He was not at all surprised, long before he reached the river that would be his guide till he reached the big hill, to note that a fine trickle of snow was beginning to filter from the heavy clouds. After a while that ceased, but a wind began to moan among the sparse pine trees.

He had reached the long ridge before anything like bad weather developed, but it came with a vengeance then. He was glad to be able to find the comparative shelter of the southern slope. The wind had shifted now and was coming dead from the north. There was ice in its breath and a growing spelter of snow. He finally braved the blast to walk along the crest of the ridge, peering hopefully through the stinging swarm of white pellets to locate the big tree. He felt sure he must have gone almost far enough.

Ah, at last! Cautiously, remembering his disastrous descent the other day, he slid down the rocky, uneven slope. The wind was still here, but the cold seemed if anything more intense. A white-crueted mound told where he had left the slayer of the black fox lying. Over against the rocky wall, still undisturbed by prowling wolves, scavengers of wood and plain, he saw the cairn in which the victim lay. Pity in his heart for the motherless brood, he scanned the basin wall for the cave opening. In this waste of white it was hard to locate. Doubtless the entrance had been snowed in. He listened, in the still lee of the wind, for a sound, the whimpering of the cubs, that would guide him. Not a whine broke the silence. He groped along the rocky cliff, his mittened hands plowing through the snow, but he made the entire length, to where the turn came at the end, and his hand did not break through the thin film that he had hoped was all that hid the cave.

Back he went, this time scooping the snow away, leaving a wide furrow in the drift. Half-way back along the hundred yard path, he came upon the hole, sheltered behind and beneath a

rock. His brief exultation was lost in the chill of a further discovery. The opening was barely large enough to get his head and shoulders in. Crawling was out of the question, and if the hole shrank any as it deepened — which it undoubtedly would — he could not wriggle himself in.

He had found the cave, and the tiny foxes, if such there were — and he could not rescue them!

But neither could he give up. He threw himself flat on the ground and peered into the dark cave. He drew himself forward, till half his length was inside. Then he stopped, stuck fast. A sudden panic seized him. Suppose he could not back up? He could get no leverage on his hands, and his toes merely scraped along the surface. Then he got a foot-purchase against the top of the cave, by bending his knees back. He was loose again. But he did not feel easy till he was breathing the free outside air. It was dark and foul in the cave.

An idea came to him: If he could go back, and light a match in there, perhaps he could at least see whether the cave was occupied. He put two matches between his teeth and wriggled his way in, a few inches farther than before. Cramped, breathing painfully, he managed to get

the matches in his fingers. The rock walls were slimy; the first match merely flared smokily and went out. A rocky knob struck his knuckles; he wrenched it loose. At least he had a dry place for the other match.

The light flared up bravely, but his eyes were too dazzled at first to make out anything. Then, just beyond arm-length, he saw a huddled, brownish mass, a little mound that stirred feebly. The match went out, burning his fingers.

He could hardly breathe now, and the match fumes choked him. Dared he go forward the scant foot that separated him from his prize? He had barely been able to get out before. *Could* he go forward? His muscles were aching now from the cramped position in the narrow passage. Suppose he got wedged in. How long would the scanty air in this tiny hole last him. His body completely shut off any further supply. He was growing dizzy. A last desperate attempt to summon his waning clearness of judgment, and then he forced himself forward—an inch, two inches, half a foot. The last effort cost him a ragged tear down his side. The blood was thumping now in his eyeballs; flashes of light seemed to beat on his brain.

He nerved himself for one more strain. His groping hands pawed at the rocky floor, his nails torn back, his finger-ends bleeding. And then, his heart thumping, his fingers closed over something warm and weakly whimpering. He heard it dimly, for a great joy seemed to deafen his very ears.

He groped about, at arms length. One, two, three, four, five, the last a stiff, inert little body that he dropped again. That was all. Four tiny fox puppies — and it was *miles* out to the free air. The wonderful, life-giving air!

Don made it. How, he never knew. He remembered a struggle that cost him all he had to give. He remembered the numbness that crept over him. He could even recall the despair that came when his last conscious effort did not free him.

And then he was cold. That was his first thought as he came to. Cold, and it was snowing in his face. He lay out under the storm-darkened sky, but the bitter, stinging wind was as sweet to his nostrils as the balm of spring. His lungs could not get enough of it.

Then he remembered the baby foxes. They lay sprawled out on their stomachs, their puny legs

too weak to hold them up. Don caught them up out of the snow. He opened his coat and snuggled them against his warm body — warm and wet, for blood was oozing through his undergarments. Hastily putting on his snowshoes, he started off through the basin. There was no time now for climbing the ridge. It ran due north and south; he could go around it with little loss of time. Somehow, he did not feel equal to clambering up its forbidding slope.

His head was still light from the suffocation, but he made good speed. Mile after mile he shuffled off, the ridge at his left, a swelling prairie stretching off at his right as far as eye could reach. An hour, two hours he followed the ridge. Then he stumbled, fell over a snow-burdened vine. As he rose painfully to his feet again he realized that he was tired, dead tired, and hungry. He reached for his snack. It was gone, lost out in the cave very likely. He felt discouraged, sick at heart — he was hungrier than he had thought. And cold, how cold it was — *he* was. He must hurry on.

He tried to break into his old stride, but the wait had chilled his weary legs. His progress was awkward, painful. And it was growing

colder. Or else he was. He took off his mitten and reached inside his coat. At least the baby foxes were warm. One tried to nurse at his finger. That made him feel better and he almost laughed. Almost. It's hard to laugh when the muscles of your face are frozen stiff.

He looked ahead. The ridge still stretched out before him. Could it be that he had missed his way? Could it be that a spur of the ridge angled off, and he was following the spur? Then he was lost. Queer, that, to be lost. Almost he chuckled. But it came out a groan. Lost! Cold! Tired, dead tired. Well, at least he could keep warm by running. Yes, he would take off his snowshoes and run. Good idea that. Then he stumbled. It was hard to get up — so easy just to lie there and rest. That was what he needed: rest. Queer he hadn't thought of it before. It was warmer down here in the snow. Much warmer. Why, he was quite warm now; a comfortable glow swept all through him. All sorts of odd fancies crossed his mind. There was Alice Frantzen; funny why she liked to put on her brother's overalls; girls were all like that; and cherries were — well, Husk didn't eat cherries anyway. But he was resting . . . resting . . .

CHAPTER XVI

A VICTORY FOR TWO DONS

Don had been wandering longer than he realized, and the spur of the ridge had swung about more than he knew. Had he not been so light-headed he would have realized that the slope no longer was at his right, but at his left, and that he had circled back almost to his old trail. A hundred feet more would have put him in his own tracks.

But he had been plodding on for hours, and dark was not far off. Back in the cabin his note had been found and Claire and her father were not particularly worried, although the man went to the door often through the morning and cast many anxious glances at the threatening sky. When it began to snow he was relieved, but when the first soft fall gave way to the driven hard pellets of a blizzard he shook his head worriedly and said to Claire:

“ I do hope the boy gets back soon. A man’s

life wouldn't be worth much out there by night. Brave lad, Don is, but foolhardy."

"He's got a heart in him," answered Claire, "as big as his whole sturdy body. Risking his life for baby foxes he's never seen!"

"He's certainly risking it to-day. It looks bad."

The wind howled and prowled about the cabin. Every crack and door had a zone of deadly cold about it. Secure as the log cabin was, it shook and groaned with the blast. The man took to pacing up and down, and as the day wore on and the storm grew worse, he could stand the suspense no longer.

"Claire," he decided, "I'm going out after him. If I can tramp up and down here worrying, I guess I can stand the gaff out there. Have a piping hot——"

"Huh, you can make up your mind that I'm going with you, father. You'll need someone along to rescue you both."

Thus it was that, hours later, as the early darkness came on, two fur-protected seekers doggedly held to a faint trail in the shifting snow-drifts that led them farther and farther off the route to home.

"I can't understand it," muttered the man.

"He's lost, that's why," suggested Claire.

"He started back along the north side of the ridge and missed the pass where the north branch spurs off."

"If I were sure you were right ——" hesitated her father.

"You're just as sure of that as you are of anything."

"Come on, then. If he followed that spur — all the way, that is — he came back to his own tracks. The ridge makes a complete circle. It's the bed of an ancient lake, most likely. If we cut over to the hills yonder we'll meet him."

And so it was that Claire, a few yards ahead, stumbled over a body half hidden by drifted snow. Her startled cry brought her father in a hurry. Sprawled out in the snow, a near-smile on his face, as if his thoughts were pleasant ones, lay Don. His coat had worked open, and in the snow, vainly seeking the furry nest they had known so short a time in the cave, four tiny sightless foxes tumbled about against his side, whimpering feebly.

"He's still alive, but pretty far gone," announced her father after a brief examination.

“ Help me roll him on his back and get at his face and hands.”

They thumped and they rolled and they rubbed him with snow. For a long while there was no response. Finally a healthier red began to show in the blued cheeks, and the boy stirred. He whispered something, but what, they could not make out. Then, after another age, it seemed, he struck out against their ministering hands. He sat up, groaned, and then dropped back inert.

They worked harder than ever, Claire calling his name every few minutes in the hope of arousing him. When he responded, they managed to get him to his feet and started his legs going. Like a man asleep he stumbled along, leaning heavily on them. His eyes were open now, and he seemed to realize where he was, but his faculties did not respond.

Then, suddenly, he came fully awake. “ The foxes! ” he cried. “ The baby foxes — I had them — they’re gone.”

“ I’ve got them,” exclaimed Claire, halfway between laughing and crying. “ In my pockets. Can you put on your snowshoes now? We’ve got to make a start for home.”

Don lurched perilously as he straightened him-

self up after putting on the snowshoes, but once he had managed to set himself going, he seemed to do well enough. Fortunately, his feet had suffered least. The snow had stung the blood in his face and hands into circulating, and a healthy glow was spreading over his body. In single file, Claire ahead, Don next, and her father somewhat in the rear, they swung into the direct route for home.

Excitement had kept Claire and her father at high speed until the boy was found; now, Don found no trouble in keeping up. Claire might perhaps have gone faster, but her father, weakened by his long illness, and now feeling the reaction from their previous excitement, lagged more and more. Claire, happening to look back while she waited for the two trailers to catch up, Don having stopped to help his companion out of a drift into which he had floundered, gave a cry of alarm, and catching up a handful of snow, began rubbing her father's face with it. "Keep close, after this. Another five minutes and it would have been too late. Your nose was as white as the snow itself."

Her father laughed at the tone of command in his daughter's voice, but kept obediently just

at her heels. She went slower and slower, for the man had to spur himself to hold the pace. He seemed to be growing drowsy, rousing himself only with an effort to answer her questions.

“I’ve got to — to — rest — a little,” he said slowly, when Don had turned back to help him out of another drift into which he had toppled. They stopped with him; truth to tell, they were all going on their nerve and even a brief rest seemed to help.

Once more they fought their way ahead, but now the wind, instead of being at their backs, buffeted them fiercely, first full in the face and then tried to push them out of their path. Weary, cold, suffering untold agonies of limb and muscle, they had to fight for every foot of advance. Again the man begged a rest, and again they stopped with him.

This time they sat down, Don burrowing a snug cave in a great bank of snow that had swirled around the base of a cliff. Here they were shut off from the wind, and comparatively warm. They felt almost comfortable.

“How far are we?” asked Don after a while. Claire’s answer came slowly, and he had to listen intently before he could catch the mumbled

words. So drowsy was his own mind that he attached no meaning to this circumstance, but burrowed deeper into the blanketing snow.

“Around this hill and then five miles across the prairie,” Claire had said. Five miles — Oh, well, once they were warm again, even five miles of wind-swept prairie could not — not —

Perhaps three minutes later Don aroused himself with a start. His numbed brain was conscious of the fact that neither of his companions had spoken for a long while — how long, he could not be sure.

“Claire!” he called sharply.

There was no answer, nor did either of his companions stir. Don staggered as he forced himself to his feet. He bit his lip till the blood came, in an effort to concentrate his faculties. Vaguely he realized that Claire and her father were freezing to death — that unless he could rouse them, this was the end — for all of them.

He caught up great handfuls of snow and dashed it in their faces. First one, then the other he rubbed and jolted about, shouting frantically, not so much with the hope of arousing them, but to keep himself nerved to the task. At last Claire responded, but feebly; she had been far

gone. Her father resisted their united efforts, and Don was in despair, especially since he dared not relax his watch of Claire.

“If — we — could — get him — on his feet,” he cried hoarsely. “We’ve got to do something — more! — Help me.”

Between them they managed to raise the heavy, inert body, and pulling, pushing, crying, shouting, they impelled him to take a few clumsy, faltering steps. Snowshoes were left behind. Slipping, breaking through the thin crust every few steps, the three lunged along, Claire but little better off than her father. He tottered drunkenly along, slumping down into the snow the second the hold of either beside him relaxed.

It was a nightmare of a journey across the white waste. Claire was too far gone to be of any help in guiding their steps, and more than once the sorely tested Don felt sure he had lost the way. A gray darkness lay over the world of snow and storm, and the wind beat in their faces with fierce triumph in its breath of sleet-like snow. Their way was dimly visible for a scant dozen feet. A thinning of the clouds toward the east was their only guide. Don knew the home-hill must lie to the right of that — he

prayed they would strike the river before they passed the twin hills. Otherwise they were lost indeed.

A dull pain seemed to settle over him, with a center in the side he had gashed there in the cave. The place was bleeding afresh, he sensed dimly, for there was a damp, warm feeling against his clothing. The back of his head seemed on fire; a thousand times he thought how much easier it would be to drop down in the snow and just forget. After all, it was such a comfortable death. No pain, only a growing numbness, a warm feeling of comfort and content. Then — the darkness.

He fought back the thought. He talked aloud, to himself, for both of his companions were far past reply. Once he sang, but the sound of his cracked, delirious voice shocked him back into sanity. And then Claire began to laugh. Perhaps it was his singing. She could not stop. She reeled, loosed her hold on her father's arm, and slid easily, limply, into the soft prairie snow. Her support gone, the man swung around against Don, knocking him off his feet. The two went lumbering to the ground.

Don tried to rise, but sank back with a groan.

It was the end — this was the end of everything.

He could not carry them both. His strength was spent; he could not rouse them again.

But he could not give up. Back there when he had been alone, it had not seemed to matter so much. Now — there were three, and something in Don's breast drove him to one last desperate effort.

He lurched to his feet, took two steps forward, and then fell, headlong, down a steep bank. Fierce, unreasoning anger flared up in his heart — why had that bank been placed just there, to steal away the precious remnant of his strength? He had twisted his leg, too, and the smooth surface onto which he had fallen gave him no leverage in rising. His feet spraddled out from under him — “like a pig on ice,” he said in a whisper, his pain-shot mind taking vague comfort that he could remember the comparison.

And then, with a suddenness that set him laughing, jerkily, with an intensity that was not far from tears, the explanation of his queer antics dawned upon him. He *was* on ice — snow-covered, to be sure, to a depth of at least two feet, but level and crusted deep. It was the river bank he had fallen down. He had found the

river. Somewhere, up or down, was the hill and on its sheltered slope the log cabin.

Well, he had a chance at least. But he would have to act quickly. The deadly cold would not be long in laying its icy fingers on the hearts of his two friends back there.

He jerked off his mackinaw. Laying it loosely over the head and shoulders of Claire's father, he heaped up a great mound of soft snow over the prostrate body.

Then he caught up the limp body of Claire in his arms and began staggering toward the river. Claire was no lightweight. She was nearly as heavy as sturdy Don himself. He felt himself weakening under the load, but his courage seemed to have gained its second wind. The snow was smooth on the river; he could slide his feet forward snowshoe fashion, and save himself the exertion of lifting them.

On he staggered through the darkness, each step slower than the last. The river swung round a bend, and he blundered into the bank. He fell, the force of his downward plunge broken by Claire's unfeeling body.

When he straightened up again with his burden, he strained his eyes, peering into the gray gloom

ahead. Was that only a cloud — or was it — could it be the home-hill? A few steps up the bank told him that the blot against the sky was indeed solid earth.

A great cry of thanksgiving welled up in his heart. Five minutes more and he would be in the cabin.

They were a long five minutes, but Don stood the gaff. He reached the cabin, threw open the door and then fell headlong into its cheery warmth, Claire rolling over and over like a log as she was thrown from his arms. He wanted to stay and revive her with cold snow, to help lessen the pangs of returning circulation and consciousness, but there was no time to be lost if he was to save her father.

There was a lantern in the cabin, a smoky affair with a homemade wick and a cracked chimney, but Don was not inclined to quarrel over its imperfections. He lighted it with fingers that had begun to tingle and burn, then, throwing over his shoulders a heavy coat from the rack by the fireplace, he dog-trotted down the narrow path, around the base of the hill and out onto the river. It seemed no time at all till he had found the white mound. Its shape gave him a weird

start, it looked so like a heaped-up grave. But he had no time to spend in forebodings, for a hard task lay ahead of him.

Claire's father was a fairly heavy man — a hundred and eighty pounds of solid bone and muscle. Now he seemed to weigh down like lead. Don tried carrying him, then dragging him. Through it all, not a sound came from the man, not a tremor of a muscle. More than once Don was sure that all his effort was a sheer waste of nerve and muscle, for there was a rigidity about the man's body that convinced the boy that death had already come. But he did not falter or pause on that account. Ahead of him was warmth — and rest.

And then he was there. He closed the cabin door behind him, looked dizzily at the fire, the lamp, the familiar room. Then the floor seemed to come up to meet him.

Don sat up and rubbed his eyes. Then he looked about him in bewilderment. He had dropped over on the floor — that was the last he could remember. Now he was in bed — yes, and there was Husk close beside him, dear old faithful Husk, whose broken leg had healed so

slowly. He tried to raise his hand to pat the dog on the head, but his hand felt strangely heavy. A cheery voice called in from the kitchen:

“ See what he wants, will you, daddy? I do believe he’s finally waked up.”

“ How long did I sleep? ” called Don.

“ Only thirty-six hours or such a matter. We thought you had decided to take a steady job at it.” She came in and laid her hand on the boy’s forehead. “ We don’t know how to tell you how brave you are, and how much we thank you, Don-boy. I’m sure you’re the pluckiest chap in all the world.” There was a suspicious moisture in her eyes as she said it.

Her father came over and stood beside her, reaching down and covering Don’s hand with his own.

“ There was another Don Blackburn once, and the North Woods rang with stories of his daring in the old days, but that Don never made the name as proud as you have made it, son. You will go far to make good his failure—that other Don Blackburn.”

“ But he didn’t fail! ” exclaimed the boy, his voice pitched high in his weakness and earnest-

ness. "They still tell the story of his last exploit, how he gave his own life to save his comrades. He died a hero. All my life I have had his name held over me, to shame me."

"They will never do it again," cried Claire, her eyes shining.

"And why not? If I go back home now I go a failure. Instead of going back to my father and saying, 'Here is that thousand dollars to stand between you and absolute ruin—here, won by your worthless son'—I can go back with a story no one will believe."

"Oh, but surely——"

"Go back and brag of rescuing a man whose name I dare not tell!"

"Dare not?" It was both Claire and her father who almost shouted the question.

"Dare not. Could I go back and say that I, Don Blackburn, had found my hero uncle hidden away, afraid to go out and face the judgment of the world!" the boy's voice rang out. It was the thought he had been turning over and over in his mind. Long since he had made up his mind that some day he would speak out, for Claire's sake, for the man's own sake. Now he went on:

“ Can I go back to Lac du Chien, where the name of Uncle Don is a household word, and tell that I, worthless Don — Lazy Don, they call me — have proved myself a bigger man than that hero for whom I was named? Uncle Don —— ” he sat up on his bench and held out his hand — “ Uncle Don, you’re just as *big* as they thought you were. Come back with me — *home!* ”

“ I can’t, boy. ” The man was deeply moved. “ It would take a kind of courage I haven’t got — you have. They tell how I gave my life to save my friends. What would they say if they knew that I had abandoned my companions to save my own miserable hide? ”

“ They wouldn’t believe it, any more than I do. ”

“ And it wouldn’t be true. But it is the only story I can tell them — unless I tell the truth — about Claire — and her mother. I can’t do that. I can’t wreck my own little girl’s whole life. Would you ask me to brand myself as a coward by going back? ”

“ You’ve got to wear it or be it. Uncle Don, it isn’t fair to Claire. She has a right to her chance. No one need know. ”

“ But I *did* abandon my friends, Don. I did

leave them to their fate. It was the winter Claire was born—her mother needed me—needed me more sorely than any other human being. I went. I, the pureblood, the hero of my race, left my white comrades to their fate, to hasten to the side of my halfbreed wife, the mother of tiny Claire, then a wrinkled red infant of a day or so. I couldn't tell them that. I couldn't blast my girl's whole future by admitting the Indian blood. And I can't go back—to—tell—the world—Don Blackburn was a—coward."

"Then I am a double failure. I lost the black fox——"

"But, Don," it was Claire who interrupted him eagerly, "you did not lose—not as you think. You have forgotten the four little baby foxes."

"Your father told me all about the secret of black foxes. The four tiny things are not worth the carrying back."

"Ah!" cried Claire, laughing but triumphant. "But freaks run in fox families as they do in human families—like twins, sometimes. What if I tell you that one of those puny, suckling little whimperers out there beside the stove is——"

“Black!” interrupted Don. “Not black!”

“Black as a lump of coal — which I have never seen.”

“Then I have not failed entirely. Oh, Uncle Don, it means more to me — to you too and to Claire — than any fox pelt — than even a thousand black foxes — to have you go back and — and face the music. All my life I hated you — your memory. Hated you and loved you. You were a sort of god to me — everything that was brave and good and noble. I hated you because I was not those things. Because people, my father, told me I was not. Yet I tried to be. Can’t you see — it isn’t just Claire, and it isn’t just going back to their sneers. I’m going back to that too. I’m going back to fight down my name — *Lazy* Don. If you are the man who deserved a moony, dreamy, misunderstood boy’s admiration and — and love — you’re going along. Claire, tell your father what you told me. Tell him what going back means to you!”

Claire’s lips parted, her eyes pleaded, but not a word did she say.

“Uncle Don!” the boy’s cry was eloquent. The man’s face showed that he was deeply moved.

“No man ever said that Don Blackburn was

a quitter," the boy cried out into the silence. "I'll never believe it till I hear it from his own lips."

Husk had been a silent witness of the trying scene. Now he dragged himself over between the boy and the man and girl by the bedside. He raised his eyes to Don. Perhaps it was the set, white look on the boy's face, perhaps the silence. At any rate, he raised his shaggy head and stretched his throat in a howl as mournful as dog ever vented.

Uncle Don clapped his big hand about the dog's snout. "Don't howl for me, Husk, old boy; I'm not dead yet — nor a quitter. Claire, honey, get your duds ready. We're going south for the winter — back home!"

